RESISTING ARREST: AN (AUTO-THEORETICAL) ESSAY ON PRISON LITERATURE

James A. Ferry
University of Rhode Island, jferry@uri.edu

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RESISTING ARREST: AN (AUTO-THEORETICAL) ESSAY ON PRISON LITERATURE

BY

JAMES A. FERRY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

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JAMES A. FERRY

APPROVED:

Dissertation Committee:

Major Professor          Derek Nikitas

Valerie Karno

Christian Gonzales

Brenton DeBoef

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

All philosophy, according to Nietzsche, amounts essentially to “the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious autobiography.” Wayne Booth, author of The Rhetoric of Fiction, maintains that the creative writer is never ideologically disinterested, that “there is always some deeper value” at the core of the text. The current project explores the intersection of these two assertions; the degree to which the theoretician betrays his ideology is in dialectical tension with the idea that the life-writer is a latent ideologue. This project employs an auto-theoretical approach: an integration of theory and philosophy with autobiography. A series of autobiographical sketches are interpolated with critical analysis of some canonical prison texts, all of which are analyzed using a variety of critical approaches, including deconstruction, poststructuralism, narratology, and critical theory.

I argue that the body of work we call “prison literature” can be taxonomized, somewhat serviceably, into three broad categories: 1) individualist or “antiheroic” texts; 2) revolutionary or “rebellious” texts; and 3) compassionate or “empathic” texts. The critical portion of this project explicates and defends these categories while the creative portion both exemplifies and interrogates them. The narrative arc follows the (anti)hero as he sheds his pitiful (individualistic) philosophy for one that’s more compassionate, the implicit question being what is the correlation, if any, between the author’s reading of the canonical prison texts and his own personal experience? Might his ideological transformation (individualist to empath) have something to do with his incarceration or his writing or both?
Thus, the project itself—the conditions necessary for its own emergence—unpacks progressively. The questions undergirding the project are as follows. How salient are both Nietzsche and Booth’s assertions? How are we to effectively analyze prison literature which we relegate to categories while arguing that these same categories are contingent and unfixed? The (overt) critical thesis argues for categorical distinction. The (covert) creative thesis argues for contingency and change. It’s the tension between these two theses that drives the project, but the overarching theme is that the “prison(er)” is not a monolith, that the experience is different across personalities and cultures, and that differing value systems have a way of manifesting on the page. We argue, ultimately, for evolution over stasis, becoming over being, humanity over “criminality”—or, as Ioan Davies puts it, “the articulation of hope against the imposed textuality of representation.”
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*I often changed parts, but it was always the same play.* – Albert Camus

I was on the tail end of my supply cycle when the cops showed up. It’s to their detriment, I think, that the morning raid is their modus operandi, at least when it comes to low-level dealers, who tend to sleep in. I was planning on meeting with my dealer later that day, and had I done so, I’d have been flush with product, enough to put me away for four or five years, maybe longer. But these early birds only found about two ounces of coke, plus some pills I had lying around. Six months in LA County Jail, three years’ probation. In the end I spent about four and half months inside. It was plenty. Years later I would go back voluntarily for my first official teaching job. I can’t say that the jailers respected me for that, though they seemed at the very least to tolerate me this time. Originally, when I was released, I was jettisoned out a side door in the dead of night. I can’t recall how I got home, but I’ll never forget that a random deputy insulted me on the way out. *See ya soon, fuckface.*

Fuckface or not, I was facing a five-year gap on my résumé plus a fresh felony charge: a scarlet letter etched onto my chest for the foreseeable future. I managed to accumulate enough pages to apply to the MFA program at Goddard in Vermont, and I was accepted. This, for me, felt like what Arthur Koestler would call the “blue sky of freedom,” or what Victor Serge would describe as a “triangle of sky.” That tiny glimmer of hope that a convict feels when a slice of sunbeam breaks into his cell. For so long I’d been negotiating my way through life, sizing people up, playing the angles. Social
engagement was about positionality: always occupying one side of a transaction. Since I’d had the drugs, I’d had the leverage; people were more accommodating than they otherwise would have been, which I simply attributed to my affability: a symptom of my inflated ego. Now I was being given a shot because of something I’d written. In my tiny rented room, on my way to go wash dishes, I nearly wept.

I had no sense of entitlement. I was being given a chance at time when I didn’t feel as though I deserved one, and I was determined to make the most of it. No longer living in Los Angeles, snorting coke every night in some inner sanctum, I was becoming reacquainted with human frailty. I was never sinister or sociopathic, simply numb. This is why drug addicts find it so difficult to clean up: it’s not so much that you miss the drug (the “high” has long since morphed into maintenance); it’s that when you get clean, that’s when you realize how dark you really are, what you’d been compensating for, how defective your personality is. I had been raised well, with loving parents and all the comforts of home. Immersed in a superficial environment coupled with long-term drug use, I had become something of a social Darwinist, apathetic, an individualist. Jail helped. The writing helped even more.

This all came sharply into focus when I got my first teaching job, at a medium-security prison in Cranston, Rhode Island. Students weren’t as attentive or engaged as I would have liked, but they were hardly the miscreants that the administration had made them out to be (they’re all con artists; you can’t trust them). This surely says something about the way in which we categorize human beings according to a hierarchal structure that benefits some at the expense of others. I encouraged my students to reflect on their experiences without making it mandatory; they could write about whatever they wanted
so long as they adhered to the rudiments of the five-paragraph essay. I could see

glimmers of redemption in their writing, what Walter Benjamin would call a “spark of
hope,” or more specifically, a “dialectical image.” They were reflecting on their pasts
through the prism of their present situations, creating constellations that “flash up in a
moment of danger.” Their lives were on the line, and they knew it. This was about the
time that I became interested in prison literature on a scholarly level.

There’s some debate as to the ontological status of prison writing. Among the
scholars who teach or have taught the material, some of whom have published book-
length treatises, the question of “genre” is a bone of contention. Doran Larson, editor of
Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in America, describes prison literature as such:
“Critical study of prison writing deals with an extant, global genre […] I hope to go
further, to deepen understanding of the stakes of reading prison writing as a genre” (143).
For this he was admonished by our colleague Rivkah Zim: “Prison writing is not one
genre, as some have argued, or even a hybrid (there is no standard typology of the form)”
(10). Bruce Franklin, whose Prison Literature in America is a seminal text in the field,
seems to agree: “I do not mean to suggest that contemporary American prison literature
can be considered a literary genre. It consists of novels, plays, poetry, essays, letters,
songs, autobiographies, etc.” (234-5). The sprawling-ness of the corpus is cited by Ioan
Davies, author of Writers in Prison, as the main reason why it’s so difficult to assign
categories: “In this century the amount of literature that has emerged out of these
autobiographical experiences far exceeds that of all previous prison literature, and
therefore any attempts to weld the literature into one continuous narrative are doomed to
failure” (232). More recently, Simon Rolston, author of Prison Life Writing: Conversion
and the Literary Roots of the U.S. Prison System, falls firmly into the genre camp: “After the second World War, prison writing, and prison life writing more specifically, became intelligible as a genre” (18). Perhaps the least pigeonholing of descriptions comes from Professor Joe Lockard at Arizona State University, whose course on the material aims to “make visible an invisible literature”: “Prison literature constitutes an immense and too-little read body of US and world literature. This is the literature that emerges from, records, or imaginatively engages the experience of incarceration irrespective of reason.”

Irrespective of reason and, I would add, irrespective of motivation. Why write “prison literature” at all? Who’s the target audience? What is the organizing principle behind the work? What does the creator, in effect, hope to achieve? A document detailing one’s personal transformation from reckless criminal to reformed citizen? A case study exemplifying the effects of mass incarceration upon a certain segment of the population (what Douglas Blackmon and others would call “slavery by another name”)? Or perhaps a searing critique of political, economic, and historical injustices more broadly, the indictment of power structures that use the prison system as a means of silencing and/or eradicating “oppositionist” voices? No “reason” is necessarily more valid than any other; what “prison literature” broadly speaking aims to achieve is no different from literature itself: it allows us access to a range of experiences and emotions that would otherwise take lifetimes to experience directly. The struggles and sufferings of others can be lived vicariously instead of directly, channeling our capacity for empathy. It enables us to consider the consequences of our actions upon others. It makes us feel less alone in the world—or, to quote Emerson, “In the works of great writers, we find our own neglected thoughts.”

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1 From the syllabus for his course called “Prison Literature,” English 345, Spring 2014.
Still, attempts at organizing or categorizing such an immense body of work has proven difficult. There have been allusions and sweeping statements to this effect, such as when Davies says the following: “We might, to start with, argue that the books coming out of prisons can be put into three categories: those written by long-time criminals, those written by long-time non-criminals (homicides, political and religious prisoners), and those written by short-time criminals and non-criminals” (15). There is some validity to this, but following up on such a claim by way of taxonomy would surely have exceeded the scope of Davies’ book. I argue that the body of work we call prison literature can be taxonomized, somewhat serviceably, into three broad categories: 1) individualist or “antiheroic” texts; 2) revolutionary or “rebellious” texts; and 3) compassionate or “empathic” texts. The penning of a prison memoir or novel is a very personal undertaking, and every project is reflective not only of the author’s personal experience, but his or her sociohistorical and cultural situation, often a lifetime spent in and out of correctional facilities and the myriad philosophical and theoretical perspectives that accompany such existences.

These writers are uniquely positioned to provide insights into experiences that most of us could only imagine, to offer commentary on taboo subject matter and rarely acknowledged aspects of the human condition. To describe someone as a “long-time criminal” or a “short-time non-criminal” doesn’t tell us very much, but to describe, not someone but a text as “individualistic” or “empathic” hints at something more substantive. It not only implies that the “prison(er)” is not a monolith, but that the experience is different across personalities and cultures, and that differing value systems have a way of manifesting on the page. It implies that both people and positionalities are
malleable. It argues for evolution over stasis, becoming over being, humanity over “criminality.” Regardless of how much time someone has spent in jail, or the crime for which he or she was convicted, no one is “boxed in”: a short-timer could write an individualist text and perhaps later on, upon further reflection, an empathic one.\(^2\)

Something Nietzsche has to say about the distinction between master and slave “moralties” seems salient here: “There is a master-morality and a slave-morality,—I would at once add, however, that in all higher and mixed civilizations, there are also attempts at the reconciliation of the two moralities, but one finds still oftener the confusion and mutual misunderstanding of them, indeed sometimes their close juxtaposition—even in the same man, within one soul”\(^{\text{EN} 164}\). Or within one work. An inchoate empath at the core of an individualist, a submerged or sedimented sense of compassion encased within an antiheroic shell: this is my story. For something that Nietzsche has to say in the very same book, *Beyond Good and Evil*, may be even more applicable to the current project: “In the philosopher…there is absolutely nothing impersonal; and above all, his morality furnishes a decided and decisive testimony as to who he is” (ibid 15).

Guilty as charged. I’m no philosopher, but at some point, while working through the early stages of this project, I began to suspect that there was an autobiographical element to my argumentation, that my taxonomizing of these texts had a bit more to it than disinterested analysis; it seemed to reflect my own transformation from individualist

\(^2\) To be clear, the slipperiness of the terminology (individualist/antihero, revolutionary/rebel, compassionate/empath) is meant, literally, to reflect the slipperiness of language itself. Words will only ever get us so close to the concepts they’re meant to describe, those “things-in-themselves,” or, as Jacques Derrida explains, “The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified”\(^{W&D 289}\).
to empath—or, at the very least, notably more empathic that I could have imagined being prior to my own incarceration and, more pointedly, prior to my writing. I had succumbed to a “slave-morality”: a slave to drugs, a slave to my own insecurities, a slave to my surroundings. I was considerably more concerned with my reputation than with my character. I’m not saying that I’ve evolved to a “master-morality” (or that I’d even want one in the Nietzschean sense), but credit where credit is due. I’ve certainly come a long way. So let the reader be warned: interpolated with the analytical, “academic” chapters in service of my main argument are some autobiographical fragments or “sketches” documenting my evolution. Davies argues that “the fragmentary and the paradoxical are at the heart of much prison philosophy,” and that “prison becomes for the writer an arena in which the play of the world is acted out in a confined place” (24). A keen insight, one that becomes clearer the deeper one delves into the literature.

As I hope to make clear, prisoners have a knack for encapsulating entire philosophies in the smallest spaces: gnomic truths or what I call “jailhouse epiphanies.” Effective fragments, then, are paradoxical in the sense that they’re both incomplete by definition and excessive by necessity; they imply more than they could ever say. “They are each part of the book,” says Leslie Hill, author of *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary writing*, “but also gesture, impossibly, beyond its covers” (62). About the fragments included here I will say little, only that they were carefully composed and thoughtfully placed. I invite you, the reader, to make of them what you will; they are merely bricks in the wall. Think of this project like a concept album: every piece, fragmentary or whole (a paradox in itself: see below), contributes something to the greater scheme, while at the same time being unique unto itself. Each cog is carefully situated and nothing should
register as arbitrary. I hope to have created a reading experience, which isn’t to say that I’ve succeeded, only that I’ve tried. A belief in my abilities strong enough to risk failure—this is more than I’d have been willing to do at the time and in the place (and in the state of mind) in which most of the sketches are set. But now we should define and elucidate the categories…

**Individualist Texts**

Individualist prison texts have at their center the “I” subject position; the antihero is *always* the hero of the story. Franklin explains that “The criminal narrator is sharply marked off from the readers. He or she speaks as a lone ‘I’—an outlaw, desperado, a deviant, or member of an alien underworld—to society in general, or, more usually, a respectable reading public, incarnate in the reader” (126). Later he adds the racial component: “[T]hese white prisoners see themselves first as isolated individuals, then as members of some social subclass defined by their alienation from the rest of their society […] In fact, most literature by white convicts still maintains as individualistic a viewpoint as earlier prison literature” (142, 261). Davies describes this brand of prison lit as “the bandit/criminal hero story”: “The bandit/criminal hero story perhaps has pride of place because it places the criminal as hero not only on his own terms, but also in the terms of a society which depends for its sense of itself not on any group action, but on personal heroism, individual autonomy” (106).

This is where the fragment/paradox comes into play, the idea that the prisoner is among those who, in Adorno’s words, “fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic” (*MM* 161). The alienated, often “state-raised” outcast, banished from the supposed whole or whatever birthed it to
begin with. This is the paradox: how can something (a prisoner, a piece of writing) be both fragmentary and solitary, partial and autonomous? Hill explains the disconnect: “In order to be what it is, the fragment must be detachable from a possible past, present, and future whole….So long as it is a fragment, in other words, it is part of an absent whole, it ceases properly to be a fragment” (5). This is the main philosophical problem undergirding much of prison writing, but particularly that of the individualist text: first you push me to the margins of society, then you suggest that I can come back, but back to what? With myriad soul-crushing contingencies, I may be made “whole” again (whatever that means)—provided that I repent. This is essential to the concept of the conversion narrative, a genre convention that must be adhered to lest the individualist text fail in its mission: to bring the protagonist back from the supposed brink.

Thus repent the individualist does, crawling back by way of what Hill describes as “dialectical recuperation”: the earlier parts of the book must leave ample room for braggadocious tales as to the author’s criminal bona fides—a Pilgrim’s Progress of the underworld; this is part of the deal. Ultimately, though, we encounter in these texts a kind of lamentation and self-flagellation that we simply don’t find in the other categories.

Take the following excerpt from Caryl Chessman’s Cell 2455, Death Row:

I was one of the trees in this dark and forbidding forest. I know what it meant to live beyond the reach of other men or God. I had “proved” everything I had felt the need to prove: that I couldn’t be scared or broken or driven to my knees, that I didn’t give a damn. But here is where the tragedy lies: this felt need is compulsive and negative only. It is a need to prove one can do without—without love, without faith, without belief, without warmth, without friends, without freedom. This
negative need to prove becomes progressively greater; a ruthless tyrant, it comes
to dominate; it grows brash and boldly demanding. If not checked, the ultimate
(conscious or unconscious) need is to prove that one can do without even life
itself. (353)

Penitent, repentant, rationalistic, melodramatic. The (unironic) references to faith, God,
and forests—these are the kinds of things we find in individualist texts, and not the
others. Whether or not the author is being sincere is another matter. The point is that
these are the kinds of writers who, Franklin argues, are embarking on a “desperate, wildly
individualistic quest for personal worth” (267). Such a quest has arguably produced some
of the most compelling literature we have; but as I’m arguing here, it’s representative of a
particular strain of prison lit, one that is largely faithful to the classic hero’s journey:
“primarily the tale of how one man triumphs over what he perceives as his own worst
enemy, himself” (ibid 270).³

There are other features that I would consider peculiar to the individualist prison
text, including implied or even blatant bigotry or intolerance. A divisive attitude on the
part of the protagonist may not clinch it necessarily, provided that said material is part of
a narrative arc or anagnorisis; but individualist texts, like the others, tend to have a
particular tone. Take this excerpt from Edward Bunker’s memoir, Education of a Felon,
featured here in chapter two: “I’d learned in juvenile hall that black racism is perhaps
more virulent than white racism. Someone had once told me, ‘When we’re racists, we

³ There are exceptions, such as my inclusion of Dostoevsky’s Dead House in the individualist category
while similar texts that were inspired by the Russian camps (Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan
Denisovich, Victor Serge’s Midnight in the Century), fall firmly into the empathic group. As Davies himself
admits, “Dostoevsky saw the criminal as an antihero, but an antihero who could not realize himself
because he was dominated by surface appearances” (119). Dostoevsky’s text is a bit of an odd duck both
in terms of his oeuvre and prison lit itself, which is partially why I dedicate an entire chapter to it in this
volume. More on this below.
just want to stay away from ‘em. When they’re racists, they want to kill us.’ It was true: black racists wanted revenge; white racists wanted segregation” (272). Even if this weren’t offensive, it would still be flimsy—an anecdotal fallacy in keeping with what one chooses to “learn” in the penal system when one adopts an us-versus-them attitude based on prejudice, stereotyping, and what “someone had once” uttered. The statement completely ignores the sociohistorical context, puts “black racism” on equal footing with “white racism,” and pretends that bigotry can somehow be measured and/or excused based on its “virulency.” Unbefitting, I would say, of someone who wants to be taken seriously as an artist, let alone a humanist. For comparison, here’s an excerpt I cite in chapter nine from Victor Serge’s memoirs:

Individual existences were of no interest to me—particularly my own—except by virtue of the great ensemble of life whose particles, more or less endowed with consciousness, are all that we ever are. And so the form of the classic novel seemed to me impoverished and outmoded, centering as it does upon a few beings artificially detached from the world….My first novel had no central character; its subject was not myself, nor this or that person, but simply men and prison. (263)

Recontextualized in this way, we get a sense of the tonal differences between these texts—a distinction that I feel has been missing from previous analyses of prison lit generally. Studying such a diverse and dynamic body of work through an ideological lens sheds light on the polyvocality of the work, the differing effects that prison has on individual philosophies, and the ways in which we might begin to consider better, more efficacious, solutions to enduring societal problems.

**Revolutionary Texts**
“Until the rise of anarchism in the early twentieth century,” argues Franklin, “autobiographical narratives by convicted revolutionaries were rare….Rather than wallowing in guilt, or professing to wallow in guilt, about their own crimes, these convict-authors began to turn a critical gaze upon society” (133). Here’s an important distinction: the part about “professing to wallow in guilt” is exemplary of the individualist texts—the creation of what I call the “empathic persona.” But what Franklin is pointing out here about revolutionary texts is indicative of one of the category’s defining features, something that Davies refers to as a “common culture of prison”:

The history of writing in American prisons is closely bound up with the history of slavery, of the chain gangs, of the penitentiaries. In fact it is difficult to conceive of any study of America prison writing which did not recognize that the country was founded on convict and slave labor, and that even the founding fathers were fugitives from justice in England. The writing of blacks out of modern penitentiaries therefore comes out of a long tradition of enslaved people. (51)

Thus, the revolutionary or rebellious text as I’m describing it here can be distinguished from the individualist or antiheroic text in that it is both unabashedly defiant and steeped in history. The former lack the pathos we find in the latter: the repentant criminal, penning his conversion narrative as a plea for readmittance to (a largely blameless) society—this is anathema to the revolutionary text’s organizing principle.

One of Davies’ main arguments in Writers in Prison is that the prisoner is penning what he calls a “countertext”—a direct response to the “interventionist text”
imposed upon the prisoner by the apparatus. The latter “frame the dominant institutions” and the former “try to map routes out of them” (4). Later in the book Davies expounds on the problem the prisoner ultimately faces: “The tendency of the interventionist ‘text’ is always to read the individual as part of a subset of problems which, if cured, could ‘reintegrate’ the prisoner into the wider society” (88). While Davies does lump certain prison writers into this “category,” he doesn’t quite make the same distinction, even though all the relevant descriptors are essentially in place. The revolutionary prison writer sees him or herself not as an “individual” at all, but part of that “common culture” that harkens back to slavery and convict leasing. In this respect, Franklin comes a bit closer to nailing the categorical essence: “From the point of view of the Afro-American experience, imprisonment is first of all the loss of a people’s freedom. The questions of individual freedom, class freedom, and even of human freedom derive from that social imprisonment. From this point of view, American society as a whole constitutes the primary prison” (244). An excerpt from Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* that we cite in chapter five would seem salient here:

I had several sessions with a psychiatrist. His conclusion was that I hated my mother. How he arrived at this conclusion I’ll never know, because he knew nothing about my mother; and when he’d ask me questions I would answer him with absurd lies. What revolted me about him was that he had heard me denouncing the whites, yet each time he interviewed me he deliberately guided the conversation back to my family life, to my childhood. That in itself was all right, but he deliberately blocked all my attempts to bring out the racial question,

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4 Davies’ concept of the “interventionist text” is roughly analogous to the Foucauldian “network of writing” out of which the “delinquent” is constructed: “it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (*DP* 189).
and he made it clear that he was not interested in my attitude toward whites. This was a Pandora's box he did not care to open. (30)

I would say that this exemplifies the revolutionary countertext *par excellence*. At bottom, these texts expose one of the core hypocrisies of modern society: how can the state apparatus, in all seriousness, continue to blame—and hence punish under the pretense of rehabilitation—individual offenders for manifesting the contradictions of its own socio-economic problems? Something that French theoretician René Girard has to say on the matter seems relevant in terms of Cleaver’s frustration: “A psychoanalytic system that no longer oscillated between the rigid conformism of social adjustment and the false scandal arising from the assumption of a mythical patricide-incest drive in the child would not result in mere tepid idealism. Rather, such a system would bring us face to face with some traditional concepts that are troubling to say the least” (*VS* 178). To jettison Oedipus and to actually start listening to what Cleaver and his fellow revolutionaries are saying—to emphasize the cultural implications of oppression and alienation instead of the personal or familial ones—would surely open that “Pandora’s box” of which Cleaver speaks.

This is “native” territory (in the Fanonian sense) for revolutionary writers, as opposed to their individualist counterparts, who are often too busy bragging or repenting to consider the larger societal implications for what we know today as mass incarceration and the “prison industrial complex.” Franklin aptly describes the revolutionary typology when he says, “The *Me* is not an individual, but a people conceived of as a single entity” (250). The “I” of the individualist text has shifted to the “We” of the revolutionist. What Franklin describes as a “key question of much later prison literature” is more applicable
here than with the previous category: “Who is the real criminal, the prisoner or the society that imprisons people?” (133).

Compassionate Texts

Compassionate or empathic prison texts go beyond the “We” of the revolutionaries to the “You” of the other. These texts bear no preoccupation with the author’s (or the group’s) own predicament; the primary concern here is human frailty and the problem of “progress”: a lingering sense that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (Benjamin, Illuminations 254). What separates these writers from their revolutionary comrades is not only their disinterest in identity politics, but their engagement with some of our oldest philosophical problems, and in particular their disavowal of structures that impose tyranny and oppression. Again, we find references to this typology only loosely, like when Davies describes his gleaning of the “prison philosophy”: “The philosophy of the prison is a philosophy that contemplates at once finitude and infinity….Above all it is a debate between the imposition of human controls and man’s involvement in making those controls; and, because it is produced in the form of writing, it is an excursion into the limits and possibilities of inscription” (25). This sounds a lot like what Arthur Koestler, author of Darkness at Noon, calls “the invisible writing”:

And then, for the first time, I suddenly understood the reason for this enchantment: the scribbled symbols on the wall represented one of the rare cases where a meaningful and comprehensive statement about the infinite is arrived at by precise and finite means. The infinite is a mystical mass shrouded in a haze;
and yet it was possible to gain some knowledge of it without losing oneself in
treacly ambiguities. The significance swept over me like a wave. (IW 351)

This exemplifies what I call the “jailhouse epiphany,” the sudden and involuntary
realization that we’re part of something larger, and hence the focus shifts: it transcends
both the “me in my cell” of the individualist and the “we in our cells” of the
revolutionaries. We have shifted to the “universal pool” of oppression: so long as some of
us are deemed the detritus of society, locked away or “liquidated,” then none of us are
free. Koestler continues: “The ‘I’ ceases to exist because it has, by a kind of mental
osmosis, established communication with, and been dissolved in, the universal pool”
(ibid 352). Compare this now to the individualist’s version of coming to consciousness,
already cited a previous section: “I was one of the trees in this dark and forbidding forest.
I know what it meant to live beyond the reach of other men or God. I had ‘proved’
everything I had felt the need to prove: that I couldn’t be scared or broken or driven to
my knees, that I didn’t give a damn.” The self-referentiality outpaces the sentences two to
one. If Koestler were Chessman’s editor, I imagine that he’d have some advice: It’s not
all about you.

And Koestler is by no means the only one. When describing the seemingly
insurmountable forces that produce countertexts befitting this category, Davies has this to
say: “The machine of the prisons and the machines of war, concentration camps and
treason trials were all cut from the same cloth, that is they all stemmed from historically
ingrained ideas of retribution and revenge, bureaucratic convenience, and a fear of
diversity and freedom of thought” (32). For the compassionate prison writer, his own
incarceration is merely incidental: indicative of a much broader and more insidious set of
problems. The prison, real as it is, is treated more metaphorically, “the sharpened projection of the outside world, and resistance to it provides the equipment for wider resistance” (ibid 33). Authors who write empathic prison texts, while certainly to the left of their individualist counterparts, are somewhat less militant than the revolutionaries, more Cornel West than Malcolm X. The “wider resistance” extends to forces both external and internal; there’s a self-awareness and perspective that we find wanting in the other categories. A condensed version of the following excerpt from Solzhenitsyn’s The Gulag Archipelago, is cited in chapter seven as an example of the jailhouse epiphany:

It was granted me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: how a human being becomes evil and how good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. (312)

Like the excerpt from Cleaver’s text cited earlier, this one from Solzhenitsyn reenforces my rationale for these categories. Even within the confines of the text itself, there’s no evidence to suggest that we should be cynical about his motives, his epiphanous discovery of his inner goodness; but when we consider the fact that as a
writer he was no longer imprisoned, and hence had no reason to appeal to our sympathies (or that of the parole board), and that his only “crime” in the first place had been to criticize Stalin in a letter to a friend—any doubt we might have as to the sincerity of the sentiment evaporates. This is simply a man deeply in touch with his own failures as a human being, his complicity with a corrupt and oppressive system, and his commitment to being a better person. Again, we find these kinds of sentiments in the other texts as well, but they fail to resonate; in short, we smell a rat (see chapter four on Nathan Leopold and chapter six on George Jackson for examples of why we should be skeptical in some cases).

Though Solzhenitsyn doesn’t elaborate on such striking admissions (murderer, oppressor), we can imagine the guilt he feels for his legally-sanctioned (but to his mind morally reprehensible) military (dis)service. The author had long since turned his back on Stalin’s ruthless totalitarian regime, and he wrote in secrecy, at great personal risk, out of a sense of duty. On submitting the manuscript for his first novel, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, he had this to say: “I handed it over—and was gripped by agitation, not of an ambitious young author, but of a hard-bitten camp veteran who has been incautious enough to leave a trail” (Klimoff 91). These trepidations hardly subsided as his literary fame grew; if anything, they intensified. On penning The Gulag Archipelago, his magnum opus, he had this to say: “I had to conceal the project itself, my letters, my materials, to disperse them, to do everything in deepest secrecy. I even had to camouflage the time I spent working on the book with what looked like work on other things” (GA, “Afterward”). To our knowledge, all of Solzhenitsyn’s manuscripts have survived.
We cannot say the same, however, for Victor Serge, who, above all in my estimation, epitomizes the compassionate prison scribe. Like both Koestler and Solzhenitsyn, Serge’s only real crime was being an “oppositionist.” Unlike them, Serge wrote considerably more than he published; several of his manuscripts were confiscated by various authorities and never saw the light of day—epiphenomenal, he explains, of the life he’d chosen: “They have shot all the men who made the greatness of those times: it is natural that they should kill the works in which that greatness was reflected” (MC xi).

Serge was an activist first, author second, though this in no way diminishes his literary output, which is both substantial and important. Richard Greeman, who translated several of his novels, has this to say about the prolific and dedicated author: “A veteran, eventually lonely survivor, of revolutionary movements in half a dozen countries, witness-participant to several major victories and defeats of the revolutionary proletariat in the first half of the twentieth century, his ‘knowledge of men and things’ was unequaled—as was his devotion to the truth” (ibid viii). A printer by trade, Serge made little money over his lifetime and died in poverty and relative obscurity in Mexico, where he was living in exile. Evidence of the empathic nature of his texts can be gleaned thematically and locally, holistically and at the sentence-level. Rarely is Serge overt about his particular situation, but every now and then he gives us some insight, such as this gem from his memoirs: “For my own part, I have undergone a little over ten years of various forms of captivity, agitated in seven countries, and written twenty books. I own nothing” (9-10).

Rather than “rat” on his comrades, Serge took the rap, as they say. From his memoirs: “From a legal point of view I could have easily cleared myself...but I was determined to assume all responsibility” (36). This is supported by the evidence. In this regard, Serge and I are kindred spirits; I, too, declined to “drop dime,” but more on this later.
Peter Sedgwick, who translated these memoirs, has this to say about the author’s distinctive style: “Serge often manages his evocation of the person by means of physiognomic detail: how this face was puffed (bouffi), that one solid looking (carré), how certain eyes were gentle, or harsh, or firm” (MR x). Though not above mocking those who he felt deserved it (sloths, tyrants), Serve reserves his deepest sympathies for those who are generally considered to be the most reviled. In haggardness he locates beauty, in depravity, humanity. Take the following excerpt, cited later in chapter nine:

I scrutinized his face, by chance a little more ravaged than the ordinary face, with a somewhat higher forehead, its tense muscles and deep lines betraying more concentrated power. The bearded face of an old tycoon with irons in every fire, the kind you meet in banks and in factories, surrounded by the din of work […]

Our glances crossed, doubtless without his seeing me. His brown eyes were bewildered and absent, rather gentle: the sickly air of a man suffering migraine headaches. (MiP 74)

My commentary that follows the excerpt captures, I feel, the essence of the piece:

The din of the factory, the rapaciousness of the banker, the man’s ravaged face, his migraine headaches—all of it woven into a tapestry of misery compounded by history. Finding some kind of inner peace in prison, or even after, can be notoriously difficult, for it tends to break one’s spirit, one’s sense of self-worth.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. (259)

It’s this final sentence, I think, that embodies the empathic prison text, its raison d’être. We can do better, as a civilization, as a society, as people who live and love and struggle
and dream. I can only hope, for my part, that this very personal project of mine will contribute, in some small way, to that same ideal.

**Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter two, “The Antihero and the Empathic Persona,” examines the complexity of the individualist prison text. This chapter is actually a response to Davies’ assertion that “prison writing is essentially about violence.” He later poses an interesting question in a parallelistic form: “If the creative act is produced out of violence, to what extent is the culture of violence itself creative?” (197). It’s a good question, one that Davies attempts to answer only obliquely (with the sort of crablike argumentation that befits the academy but not the subject matter). Thus, this chapter is my attempt to tackle the question head-on, to tease out the links between the disciplinary regime, its myriad brutalities, and the creative process. We look at three classic prison memoirs, written by men who were all incarcerated in the early to mid-twentieth century: *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* by Robert Burns, *Cell 2455, Death Row: A Condemned Man’s Own Story* by Caryl Chessman, and *Education of a Felon: A Memoir* by Edward Bunker. Each man entered the disciplinary apparatus as a literate albeit troubled “delinquent” and ended up as a bestselling author; thus, we look at the texts and try to unpack the clues that establish the linkages: what happened to their bodies and their minds? How does discipline give way to brutality? And how, then, does brutality lead ultimately to rebellion and writing? The organizing principle, we argue, is the “empathic persona”—the narrative that leads from antihero to reformed citizen: that previously mentioned Pilgrim’s Progress. As we’ll see, the individualist prison text is the one most closely aligned with the monomyth, the bildungsroman.
In chapter three, “Deconstructing Dostoevsky,” we analyze Dostoevsky’s *Dead House* through a Derridean lens. Not that we have much “outside” work to do, for Dostoevsky’s narrator (who all but dissolves into the author almost immediately), cannot seem to define the concept that serves as the text’s organizing principle: freedom. For the narrator, freedom is the ideal, made possible only by its supplement, *originary* unfreedom. In this chapter, I argue that Dostoevsky’s text shows that the idea of “freedom” becomes the “absent presence” (or the presence of an absence) which gives Dostoevsky’s narrator the *idealization* of a full, present freedom, which becomes increasing difficult to articulate. Freedom as an abstraction is, as Derrida would say, “ungraspable.” Both terms (freedom/unfreedom) are always already at work as an opposition, with the hierarchized term depending on the other for its identity. What our narrator is in effect chasing is the primary source or “origin” of freedom: that which imbues it with meaning—the *supplement*. In Derridean terms, the “supplement” refers to that which provides the metaphysical concept of “freedom” with the illusion of pure *presence*, the idea that it exists prior to and independently of its opposite. Here we see how Dostoevsky’s text repeatedly deconstructs itself on this point; this feedback loop of freedom—the attempt to define what clearly doesn’t exist in any static, articulable form—serves as the basis for the aporia at the heart of the work, linked, inextricably, to its individualist ideology.

Chapter four, “On Truth and Lies in Nathan Leopold,” examines the implementation of suppressed and unreliable narration in Nathan Leopold’s memoir, *Life Plus 99 Years*. Here I demonstrate the author’s use of devices traditionally reserved for fiction, and I link Leopold’s association with Nietzschean philosophy to his use of these
devices—deployed, we argue, in service of crafting a narrative designed to garner sympathy from both the public and the parole board. Leopold was serving “life plus 99 years” for what some had described as the “crime of the century.” Narrative suppressions, omissions, and dissimulations are analyzed using two frameworks: 1) the “six types of unreliability” as described by James Phelan, and 2) Nietzsche’s philosophy, particularly his essay, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense.” First, we briefly review the literature on these narrative techniques, their efficacy for autobiography, and their implications in terms of Leopold’s text. Then we focus specifically on the devices as implemented: suppression and unreliability, the former as related to Nietzschean philosophy, the latter as deployed across all three “axes”: facts and events; knowledge and perception; and ethics and evaluation. This is to say that the text displays three variants of unreliability: factual misinformation, feigned or disingenuous naivete, and general unscrupulousness. Lastly, the chapter examines Leopold’s use of narrative digressions, their strategic deployment as related to both the unreliability and to the Nietzschean influence, and the purpose that this concoction serves as an organizing principle. Arguing against the popular belief that, with autobiography, the author and narrator collapse into one, the essay broadly interrogates what it means to be truthful in a “post-truth” society.

In chapter five, we pivot to the revolutionary section with “Escape from the Tower,” an intervention into decolonial discourses. Some of the most prominent theoreticians in the field—Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o—have been studied and cited by incarcerated black writers documenting their process of mental decolonization: the reconstructing of their sense of self and a fuller understanding of
factors contributing to their incarceration. A close reading of Fanon’s texts in particular reveals the undergoing of three distinct yet overlapping phases: 1) the “colonized” phase, characterized by an arrested psychological development or false consciousness; 2) a “semiconscious” phase, whereby the catharsis begins, but the outlet(s) are insufficient or misdirected; and finally, the “decolonized” phase, characterized by renewed focus and sense of belonging. We argue in this chapter that these phases can traced through the prison narratives of black revolutionaries, and that this process has been similarly analyzed by other authors—Gramsci, Camus—in other contexts as a general “deprogramming” or coming to consciousness. For any subject living and struggling in an oppressive space, the process of decolonization (or disalienation) is meant to describe the reintegration of the prisoner’s fragmented psyche and sense of being, a process of ridding “the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence” (Fanon, *Wretched* 51).

In chapter six, “Determined,” we continue the revolutionary section with an analysis of George Jackson through a “schizoanalytic” lens. Here we argue that the use of a line from Jackson’s prison text, *Soledad Brother*, by prominent French philosophers Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, amounts to “contextual misrepresentation”: an attempt is being made by the theorists to appropriate some of Jackson’s revolutionary bona fides without having considered whether or not the text they’re citing (or citing improperly) is conducive to the theoretical and philosophical concepts they propose. This chapter demonstrates that Jackson’s writing, while corresponding to much of what D&G are arguing in both volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, is contextually misrepresented in that Jackson’s use of language tends towards the molar instead of the molecular, the
whole instead of the partial, interest instead of desire, exclusive instead of inclusive
disjunctions, etc. Jackson represents what Michel Foucault describes in his preface to
Anti-Oedipus as a “sad militant”: someone whose interests may be aligned with the
revolution on a molar level, but whose desires are reactionary—even fascist—on a
molecular level. Simply put, the Jackson-of-the-text is someone who, despite all allusions
to the contrary, remains oedipalized, a subject under capitalism, a neurotic. The
revolutionary status of the text is placed under interrogation: the unconscious desires
appear to be incongruent with the preconscious interests; Jackson doesn’t seem to realize
that “one makes revolution out of desire, not duty” (Deleuze & Guattari, AO 344).

With chapter seven, we move on the compassionate prison texts, which we’re
approaching somewhat differently. This chapter is actually the first of a three-part series
called “This Storm We Call Progress”—inspired by Walter Benjamin’s Theses on the
Philosophy of History. I had been having difficulty deciding which text(s) to focus on
individually for this section. Since both the individualist and revolutionary sections have
at least one chapter that features a single author, I assumed that the empathic section
would follow suit. I was wrong. These texts, I realized, weren’t meant to be singled out;
and more than that, it seemed much more appropriate for the empathic section to be all of
a piece. Again, we’re back to the theme of the concept album: think of the final section of
this book like it was Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” in three parts. All three
feature the same authors: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Arthur Koestler, and Victor Serge, and
all three make ample use not only of Benjamin, but Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer,
Hannah Arendt, and others.
Part One is subtitled “Malignant Normality,” after a concept that Adorno scholar Shierry Weber-Nicholsen borrows from psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton to describe Adorno’s thesis in *Minima Moralia*. Totalitarian regimes, whether they come to power democratically or not, tend to permeate the landscape like a poisonous gas: odorless, it dissipates slowly at first and diffuses steadily over time. The “normalcy” of it seeps and creeps into the interstices of the culture and the popular mind, taking over every aspect of one’s daily life (hence the “totalizing” effect). Even prison deaths, I point out in the opening pages, “take on a casualness normally reserved for the most banal occurrences. Note the clipped, declarative sentences with which Victor Serge, author of *Men in Prison*, reports: ‘The dead man was carried off. Voices were heard. Someone even laughed.’” Like the others, Serge served his time for dissidence under totalitarian regimes (in his case, both Stalinist and National Socialist). These texts embody and interrogate the horror of so many senseless deaths, the creeping normality of it all, the *malignancy* of the ideologies that were used to justify the “progress” that was supposedly being cultivated and catalyzed. Hitler and Stalin both believed that they were merely “swimming with the tide of history”—horrific as that sounds in its sheer banality. These texts peel back the veil of that supposed progression, revealing the true nature of the malignancy, convincing us, as Benjamin would say, that “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (*Illuminations* 255).

Part Two, subtitled “Ends and Means,” focuses not only on the rationale behind the mass arrests and mass killings, but the basic contradiction at the core of the “philosophies” being proffered: the end goal is itself *endlessly* deferred. Stalinism and Nazism were not only atrocious campaigns in themselves, but both regimes were
predicated on a fundamental lie: that one day it would all end, that the “tide of history”
would bring us to shore, resulting in some sort of utopic state of human perfection. This
is specifically the theme of Koestler’s great novel, *Darkness at Noon.* The texts under
analysis show, as I say in the chapter, how “an ideology can proliferate, normalize, and
become so sedimented as to allow for any means necessary to achieve ‘the Party’
document.” We examine how these regimes became exactly what they’d set out to
eradicate, how the endless deferrals and vaguely-worded “decrees” created a climate of
everlasting despair (hence the similarity of the titles, *Darkness at Noon* and *Midnight in
the Century*). The irony is that the protagonists in all these works had, at one time, been
on the side of their captors. Being “oppositionists”—or merely being labeled as such—
leads in some cases to a long prison stretch, in others, death. Old Bolsheviks, like
Koestler’s “Rubashov,” were faced with a particularly vexing set of circumstances: if
every decision they’d ever made had been so carefully calculated, so precisely
determined, befitting utility and reason, to serve the “greater good”—how, then, could
they possibly have miscalculated? Something that Benjamin scholar Richard Wolin has
to say on the matter seems apt: “[I]n its reliance on the Enlightenment myth of historical
progress, historical materialism has remained a prisoner of the same logic it wanted to
transcend” (260-1). The texts under analysis not only interrogate this aporia, but they
comport, thematically, with something Benjamin has to say regarding his “angel of
history”: “His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he

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6 On the structuring of these chapters, one author and one work take the lead with the others making ample appearances. Solzhenitsyn’s first novel, for instance, seemed the most appropriate choice for “Malignant Normality,” while Koestler’s novel was the clear choice for “Ends and Means.” In actuality, and as I hope to have made clear, any of these works/authors could have been “featured” for any chapter, which is in part why three standalone chapters seemed unbefitting for this section of the book.
sees one single catastrophe….The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (*Illuminations* 257).

Part Three of “This Storm We Call Progress” is subtitled “Machinic Appendages.” Here we examine the atomization of society under totalitarian rule, the reduction of bodies, minds, and institutions to the status of appendages to the machine, and the eradication of the individual in particular. Koestler, as I point out in this chapter, seems to capture the whole of this phenomenon in a few short sentences as he describes a passing glance from one of the guards as he's being processed into prison, what he depicts as “an unconscious gesture of apology”: “In it was expressed an entire human philosophy of shame, resignation, and apathy. ‘The world is like that,’ he seemed to be saying, and neither I nor you will ever change it” (*DwD* 56). This is precisely the “philosophy” that these texts are pushing against: that we’re all essentially just numbers in a ledger, slaves to some predetermined history, appendages to the machine. As I argue in this chapter, authoritarian regimes rely heavily upon what Benjamin calls “homogenous, empty time” to install their agendas: everything comes down to the clock, the bell, what Foucault depicts in *Discipline and Punish* with the “time-table.” Everything becomes calculable; we take on a mechanistic, subservient form of existence. The effect this has is an empowerment on the part of the “victors” to (re)write history as they please, to leave gaps, to eradicate entire epochs. To undo historical events and to assume the dominant narrative. These authors are determined not to let that happen—again, often at great personal cost. All three authors (Solzhenitsyn, Koestler, Serge) were at various points

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7 What I suspect that reader will have noticed by this point in the book is that “individualism” is in no way being maligned, either as an ontology or an ideology. On the contrary, loss of individuality and mass collapse into conformity and groupthink—these are dangerous propositions. To embrace the pursuit of individual happiness and fulfillment is hardly at odds with criticizing “rational egoism” and the notion that a society consisting exclusively of self-interested actors is somehow ideal.
running, quite literally, for their lives. This is in part why I find them in dialogue with Benjamin, who, when faced with imminent death, reportedly implored those around him, Arendt included, to help secure not his personal safety, but that of his work: “It is the manuscript that must be saved,” he is claimed to have said. “It is more important than I am.” These are the real “countertexts” of which Davies speaks, the ones that both exemplify and push back against Benjamin’s declaration that “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (*Illuminations* 256).

For the record, that deputy—the one who called me a fuckface—never got his wish. I put in for a probation transfer (bureaucratic red tape like you wouldn’t believe), moved back east, and have steered clear of the cops ever since. I still think about him, though (clearly). I wonder where he is, what he’s up to. Probably put in his twenty years and retired with his pension. I’d love to sit with him, buy him a beer. I’d be very cordial. I would tell him that I understand and appreciate how difficult his job must have been, the sacrifices he surely made, all the nights he probably came home (or the days) and had to pretend for his wife and kids so as not to worry them. Eventually, though, I would hope to bring the conversation around to the burning question: *So, what was it that made you hate us so much?* I imagine that he’d try to downplay it, laugh it off. “I was just playing a role,” he’d explain. “That’s funny,” I’d say. “So was I.”
Prologue. – I was flanked by cops. There had to be a dozen of them by now, one of whom was breathing on the back of my neck, cuffing me. He asked if there was anyone else in there.

“Huh?”

“Your apartment, dipshit. Is there anyone in there?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. No. There’s nobody else. I live alone.”

He was tightening the cuffs and jerking my arms behind my back. “So,” he said, “there’s nobody waiting for us with a gun? Are you sure? I don’t feel like getting shot at today.” It sounded like a line from Die Hard or Lethal Weapon.

This cop was the feeblest of the bunch: sunken-eyed and doughy-faced and, judging by his rank insignia, subordinate. His bravado felt forced, but I couldn’t fault him for that. He was just being opportunistic, presenting himself a certain way because he could. I related to him, actually.

I was the focus of this whole investigation, the perp. They all should have known that I had no criminal record, no history of violence. I was a hipster, peddling among my own ilk; we don’t shoot cops. “No one is gonna get shot at,” I said.

They dumped me in an unmarked minivan (engine running, no AC) while they checked their weapons and other tactical devices. I sat there staring at the drab, mustard-beige carpeting and matching upholstery, smelling the stench of stale sweat and cheap cologne, feeling the thick air, the dry heat. Nirvana played softly on the radio. What else should I be? All apologies ….

Through the window to my right were five cop cars: three cruisers and two stealth units, all unoccupied with lights flashing. Police were spread out, paired up, triangulated.
Static and gibberish crackled from the radios clipped to their gun belts. They kept elbowing one another and chuckling as if at a barbeque. I understood their detachment—this was a collar, I was a suspect—and I wasn’t expecting compassion, but the chumminess was off-putting. I was reminded of waiting outside the principal’s office, peeking through the small rectangular window on the door, the one with the chicken wire. I’d be able to see the teacher and the principal conferring, and they’d be smiling and laughing and carrying on. If they’re so damn happy, then why don’t they just let me go?

My thoughts were indiscriminate: I can’t believe this is happening; this is exactly what I deserve; it’s a miracle I got away with it for so long; this isn’t happening. But one question kept circulating, unanswerable, in my mind. How much coke are they going to find?

Having handed control over to my staff, I’d been something of an absentee business owner. I didn’t know how much I was holding, though I was sure it was felony-level. One thing I did know: whatever there was, it wouldn’t be hard to find. There’d be plenty in the floorboards, some in the safe, which I kept unlocked out of laziness. A few random lines left out, perhaps. I was about to be unmasked.

I’d been in custody for nearly an hour without evidence. The cops had thoroughly searched my person. The sniffer dog had rummaged my Mustang to no avail. But now, that same dog, Rusty—whose name I would learn via the police report—was headed straight for the hub. Whatever was left over from the previous night’s sales was one thing. After five years of dealing, there had to be residue everywhere. The sticky CD cases, so much spillage, all those sneezes. That shepherd was going to succeed this time; the cops weren’t going home empty-handed, shaking their flat-topped heads.
Of course, there were onlookers. The sight of a lit-up patrol car, a couple of homeboys pressed against the graffiti-laden wall—that’s showy. This was epic. Notably absent, though, were my amigos, the ones who occupied the corner of Vendome and Marathon. I thought about all the post-party mornings: me, carting out bags of redeemable empties—my own little outreach, and on this day, a vacant curb. But the toy dogs were out with hipsters in tow, and the passing motorists were all bottlenecked by the happenings. I’d never been the object of so much fuss and inconvenience. I was embarrassed more because I felt like I should be, not because I actually was. In fact, I wanted to look at people, to look at their faces. I felt a strong urge to connect with something apart from my own apprehension, so I craned my neck and squinted through the window. I saw some people. I wished I could be one of them, any of them. Anyone but me.
CHAPTER 2

THE ANTIHERO AND THE EMPATHIC PERSONA

The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—know ye not that it is only this discipline that has produced all the elevations of humanity hitherto? – Friedrich Nietzsche

If the creative act is produced out of violence, to what extent is the culture of violence itself creative? – Ioan Davies

Ioan Davies, author of *Writers in Prison*, argues that “prison writing is centrally about violence” as often depicted by the “bandit/criminal hero” who is not so much confessing as engaging in “an individualistic assertion of the boldness of the individual in fighting against banks, policemen, bureaucrats, bungling politicians, landowners” (106). The outcast, as we might say colloquially, “sticking it to the man.” Prison is a cauldron of aggression, tension, depravity, and despair where “the play of the world is acted out in confined place” (ibid 24). There’s no need to overdramatize; the prison environment is rich material for action, comedy, horror, even romance. But the ostensible link between the disciplinary regime, its myriad brutalities, and the creative process has been explored only obliquely. Davies discusses the “apprehension of violence” in this context as a double entendre—the fear of violence as a constant source of tension as well as the apprehending of violence and the eventual transcendence of it: “[Prisoners’] writing connects the reality of violence and the attempt to rearticulate humanity, reestablishing a bond between our sense of finitude and the infinity of our experiences” (18). The finitude/infinity dichotomy is in keeping with his analogy of the “play of the world” being “acted out in a confined place.” Davies hints at a connection between confinement
and creativity, but his essay on “violent space” frames the concept as one of several “abstract mechanisms” that simmer beneath the surface; he glosses over the material deprivations and deprivities, the brutalities which lead, ultimately, to rebellion: arguably the motor for much of what ends up on the page.

We’ll look at three prison memoirs, written by men who were all incarcerated in the early to mid-twentieth century: *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* by Robert Burns, *Cell 2455. Death Row: A Condemned Man’s Own Story* by Caryl Chessman, and *Education of a Felon: A Memoir* by Edward Bunker. Each man entered the disciplinary apparatus as an intelligent, literate “criminal” and became a bestselling author; thus, the links must in some way be discernible: what did they endure? How does discipline give way to brutality resulting in rebellion? Lastly, what is the organizing principle around or within which this rebellion manifests on the page?

**From Discipline/Brutality to Rebellion**

*In this violence, according to them, tyranny confronts rebellion; each calls forth the other.* – Michel Foucault

From the moment the convict is “processed,” the body is subjected to a carefully regimented routine: a series of subtle coercions conducted at regular intervals, and kept in check through nonstop surveillance and control, a regimen that French theorist Michel de Certeau describes as “strategie”: “I call a *strategy* the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power…can be isolated” (35-6). As with the military, there’s an orderly way to do everything, a protocol for every situation, no matter how minor. Robert Burns, a war veteran-turned-
hobo, was coerced into participating in a bungled robbery in Atlanta (the total take was five dollars and eighty cents). For his participation, the judge gave Burns six to ten years of hard labor on the chain gang. This was Georgia in the 1920s, hence most of the convicts, being black, were subject to convict leasing: railroaded on trumped-up “vagrancy” charges and the like. We can see here, as Burns describes for us the rhythms of the workday, how seamlessly the slave morphed into the convict:

We began in a mechanical unison and kept at it in a rhythmical cadence until sundown—fifteen and a half hours of steady toil—as regular as the ticking of a clock…When using the pickaxes, all picks hit the ground at the same time, all are raised and steadied for the next blow with uncanny mechanical precision…The convict bodies and muscles move in time and unison as one man. (143)

Discipline works its way through what Foucault describes as the “body-machine complex”: “Over the whole surface of contact between the body and the object it handles, power is introduced, fastening them to one another. It constitutes a body-weapon, body-tool” (DP 153). One can see that this is less about the necessity of the job, and more about “composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine” (ibid 164)—a process of (de)individuation designed to wear down the prisoner’s sense of self and resolve. But it tends to produce a dialectical effect, catalyzing forms of resistance as “regulated” self-expression. “The tempo and speed is regulated,” Burns explains, “by the chanting of Negro bondage songs, led by a toil-hardened Negro of years of servitude” (143). Burns recalls the routine known as “keeping the lick”:

“A long steel rail,” croons the leader.

“Ump!” grunt all the rest in chorus as pickaxes come down.
“An’ a short cross tie,” croons the leader.

“Ump! Grunt all the rest in chorus as pickaxes come up.

“It rings lik’ sil-vah,” croons the leader.

“Ump!” goes the chorus as the picks come down.

“It shin’s lik’ go-old,” croons the leader.

“Ump!” and all the picks come down.

And so it goes all day long, with the torrid rays of the blazing monarch of the skies

adding their touch of additional misery. (143-4)

Thus, what we have here is a self-contained, organically-produced dialectic operating within this rather simple power dynamic: a microcosm of oppression and resistance. The prisoners are engaged in what Certeau calls, in contradistinction to the oppressor’s “strategies,” the prisoner’s “tactics”: “Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game...that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have” (18). We acknowledge this “making do” as a form of resistance because of its roots, its storied history within the institution of slavery. Frederick Douglass, in his classic memoir, muses on the willful delusion of well-meaning whites whose paternalistic attitude blinds them to irony as well as oppression: “I have been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake” (9). This form of ad hoc rebellion is characterized by its immediacy, its
ephemerality: “it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power” (Certeau 37). It cannot, as Certeau point out, “stockpile its winnings.” That comes later, with the writing: a sort of *reverberation* of the original rebellion, permanent this time, transcendent.

As for the oppressed, they cannot help but interpret the disciplinary strategy as blatantly arbitrary, infantilizing, or just plain degrading. “If a convict wanted to stop for a second to wipe the sweat off his face,” Burns explains, “he would have to call out ‘Wiping it off!’ and wait until the guard replied, ‘Wipe it off’ before he could do so” (51). This is not about “correcting” a wrongdoing, or the possibility of deterring one. The point is to develop a means whereby the relationship between discipline and punishment is teleological: “It was a question both of making the slightest departures from corrective behavior subject to punishment, and of giving a punitive function to the apparently indifferent elements of the disciplinary apparatus” (Foucault, *DP* 178). One can imagine how tedious these petty “call and response” rituals could get for Burns and company, but we can already see the blurry line where “tyranny confronts rebellion,” where “each calls forth the other” (ibid 74).

Thus, the germ of rebellion has less to do with the punishment itself and more to do with “the rebel’s feeling that the other person is ‘exaggerating,’ that he is exerting his authority beyond a limit” (Camus 13). Julian Hawthorne, son of Nathanial, who served a year in an Atlanta prison, asks the question, “Did you ever think what a prison would be if there was any common sense aim in anything?” (75). His point is that the aimlessness of prison life is entirely antithetical to its ostensible purpose. Disciplinary measures in the penal system are often pointless by design; the message is simple: the keepers are in
charge and the convicts are at their mercy. Edward Bunker, who was state-raised in reformatories in southern California, describes a practice called “pulling the block”:

Wrapped in layers of old wool blanket, [the block] had two eye hooks that fastened to a wide, flat canvas harness about ten feet long. The composite tile floor in a long side hall was smeared in paraffin wax. The blanket-wrapped block was pulled up and down the hall twelve hours a day. [One inmate] was on the block for thirty days for getting high on phenobarbital. (21)

Punishments are entirely out of proportion with offenses, which again, is the whole idea.\(^8\) It adds more than an element of disorientation; it has the secondary effect of humiliating the inmate in front of his peers, which breeds more violence and thus more excuses for the regime to exercise power. Bunker was sent to San Quentin in 1952 at seventeen, the youngest inmate ever to have been admitted. Much of his memoir details the abuse he endured at military school, juvenile hall, reform school, and prison: “Every place I went authority told me, ‘We will break you here’” (128). The “breaking” of a person implies a dismantling of the mental state, a wearing down of one’s sense of self so that a new (docile) entity can be erected in its place. But the prison keeper’s only (ostensible) access to the prisoner’s mind is through the body. Caryl Chessman relates his experience upon entering what he calls, cheekily, the “reformation factory”: “Whit’s indoctrination began with suddenness and violence. His first day in the receiving company, he was jabbed in the ribs by the captain for getting out of step as the company marched into the dining room” (87).\(^9\) Repeated recourse to the body as a means of reforming the mind creates

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\(^8\) “The disparity between the severity of the punishment and the triviality of the offense is often extraordinary” (Serge, *MiP* 153).

\(^9\) Chessman wrote the early chapters of his memoir in the third person, with “Whit” standing in for his younger self—before the inevitable rebellion, at which point “Caryl” steps prominently onto the stage.
what prison historian Michael Meranze calls a “paradox of punishment” (328). By any sense of logic, breaking the body should have resulted in a reevaluation of the practice, for what else could a broken body yield but a recalcitrant spirit? Meranze explains: “[T]he judgement of moral progress could not be about the anything but the body, for it was only the body, its movements and expressions, that could be interpreted” (301). Since they couldn’t see into the soul, jailers had only to observe these broken bodies to see that their strategies were faulty.

Foucault devotes the early chapters of *Discipline and Punish* to the reasoning behind the transition from torture in the public square to “correction” on the tiers of the penitentiary—and, according to him, the humanitarian factor was secondary at best. The gruesome executions, the public shaming at the scaffold—these were every bit as likely to elicit public sympathy as they were to reestablish reverence for the monarch, hence the ritual of torturing criminals was moved out of sight and, presumably, out of mind. But not out of existence. The descriptions of torture that one finds in the average prison memoir is fairly shocking. Robert Burns describes a scene that reads as though it came straight out of the “Torture” chapter of Foucault’s text:

The terror-stricken victim sits on a bench, placing his hands and feet between the boards that have notches cut out to receive them. When he is in the proper position, the Warden pulls the lever which forces the boards together, brutally squeezing convict’s wrists and ankles. After the lever is locked in place, the bench on which the convict sits is pulled out from under him and he finds himself suspended in midair, hanging by his wrists and ankles. He is kept in this state of excruciating torture for one hour. (171)
This is the only scene in the book rendered in this way: focalized externally in the present tense. The details are obviously important, but so is the implication of the reader as witness to the “torture” thus described. “The function of the public torture,” Foucault argues, “[is] to reveal the truth” (DP 44)—and in this sense we can interpret the scene as a metaphor for power, how “it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them” (ibid 27). The abuse of power, brutality masquerading as discipline, is thus the engine behind the prison writer’s struggle to “squeeze” the particular to achieve the universal. As Davies points out in his own critique of the “philosophical debate” surrounding the writing and reception of prison literature, “We are all trapped in the prisonhouse of language and are concerned primarily with the nuances of an overarching narrative” (44). Prison writing (re)presents “an occasion for contemplating the nature of the world” (ibid).

Throughout his memoir, Chessman, who acted as his own lawyer, connects the abuse he endured with the determination it fueled and the output—creative and juridical—it engendered:

I still maintain my so-called “confessions” were false. I still maintain that I was severely, viciously beaten. I still maintain the “confessions” were cynically obtained in the way I have claimed all along, with the use of violence. I invite all detectives to submit to a lie detector test with me. If the test shows, with regard to this beating, that they are telling the truth and I am not, I will abandon voluntarily all possibilities I have of survival and withdraw any and all legal actions or proceedings that may be pending […] (279, my emphasis)
The repetitive theme of “maintenance” would seem to indicate that his resistance grew in proportion to the abuse that he endured. Over the course of his memoir, Chessman’s writing increasingly reflects the rhetoric of violence, right down to his description of the style in which he composed his writs: “My briefs to the court were technically correct in detail; they were exhaustively researched and were coldly logical presentations, but they were also written in acid” (349). Thus, Chessman’s rebellion was, both in terms of his creative and his juridical output, “an alternative textual reading of American justice” (Davies 187). Davies—again, without ever establishing the link between brutality and the writing it engenders—draws a through-line between the juridical codes and the “countertexts” coming from the carceral firmament: “[T]he texts that frame dominant institutions and the countertexts that try to map routes out of them provide one of the central thematics of our culture” (4). My interpretation would be that all prisoner writing is a complete rewriting of the way in which the prisoners, themselves, have been inscribed. Another way of saying this would be that the writing serves as resistance to a process Foucault describes as “objectivizing the subject.” Writing as a means of subverting “state violence, which ignore[s] who we are individually” (SaP 781). As other theorists have noted, though, Foucault’s relegation of the subject to the “panoptic machine” leaves scant room for such resistance—a pessimistic pit into which Foucault himself was loath to fall: “[I]t is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies” (DP 217).

Certeau, for his part, pushes back on Foucault’s “fabricated subject” to allow space for practical, “tactical” procedures: “These ‘ways of operating’ constitute the
innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production” (xiv). In this case, the techniques of sociocultural production would include incarceration, and among the “innumerable practices” would be the writing-as-resistance, as reappropriation, as tactic. A reappropriation not only of space but of time; or, more to the point, an auditing of the “time served.” The writing is a response, a reaction or manifestation of a power relation. “A relationship of violence,” Foucault explains, “acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities…. [F]aced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up” (SaP 789). Writing being, arguably, among the least ephemeral and most productive—most tactical—of all “possible inventions.”

Creating the Empathic Persona

But Georgia cannot win! Risking detection and return to the chain gang, I have decided to write the true story, WHILE IN HIDING, of my entire case. – Robert Burns

Rebellion, according to Camus, is either creative or destructive, depending on the argument he’s making at the moment. Early in The Rebel, he claims that rebellion is “positive” despite the fact that “it creates nothing” (19). Later he argues that rebellion “is the logic of creation” (285). At one point he imagines, curiously, a future where the laborer’s toil gets upgraded to art:

The type of civilization that is inevitable will not be able to separate, among classes as well as individuals, the worker from the creator…. Every act of creation, by its mere existence, denies the world of master and slave. The appalling society
of tyrants and slaves in which we survive will find its death and transfiguration
only on the level of creation. (273-4)

The context here for Camus is production, not prison, though I would argue that the
prison setting would be more fitting than the factory. Camus prophesizes a day when all
workers are rebels and all rebels are creators, but the syllogism falls short: he never
makes clear how the laborer, subject to a soul-sucking routine characterized by arbitrary
discipline, is supposed to make art out of his predicament. With prison, though, the links
are demonstrably clear. Foucault spends nearly a third of *Discipline and Punish* breaking
discipline down into its constitutive components: “methods which [make] possible the
meticulous control of the operations of the body”—methods which fall under the rubric
of “general formulas of domination” (137). Thus, the gist is that discipline is the
implementation of many overlapping and compulsory exercises, all of which are forced
on the subject as a means of control. But the kind of “us versus them” discipline that
convicts are subject to—yelling, pushing, taunting, browbeating—often gives way to
arbitrary violence: a forcible attempt at reforming the mind by brutalizing the body. What
happens with certain convicts, though, is a bit more subliminal: a “gesture of rebellion”
brought on by prolonged and repeated abuse catalyzes the creative spirit: “The harder the
discipline, the harder the convict becomes. Cruelty brings only one result. Revolt!”
(Burns 152). The rebel wishes to establish empathy: for himself and for convicts
generally; what they have endured should no longer be tolerated—by anyone. In bringing
these abuses to light in a creative form, the rebel “surpasses himself, and from this point
of view human solidarity is metaphysical. But for the moment we are only talking of the
kind of solidarity that is born in chains” (Camus 17).
The closest Camus comes to yoking creativity with rebellion might be his image of the “universe” wherein some sort of unity can be built: “In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of finding it, and the construction of a substitute universe…This also defines art” (255). I would literalize his metaphor to argue that prison writers employ art as a means of imposing order and unity upon a fundamentally disordered and fragmented existence. Whole chunks of their lives have been disjointed. Shamed and stigmatized—and if freed, left reeling—the writing is an attempt at creating a “universe in which action is endowed with form, where final words are pronounced [and] where life assumes the aspect of destiny” (ibid 262-3). A place where broken lives can be put back together.

To account for the transition from rebel to writer, it would help to take a closer look at the genre in which these writers were working, why it was conducive to what they were trying to accomplish, and how, without any formal training, they were able to produce critically-acclaimed works. *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* reads more like a slave narrative than a prison memoir. The writing benefits, I suggest, by how neatly the literal conditions of the chain gang translate to metaphorical images associated with bondage: “The chains that the convicts wore were riveted to their ankles and were as much a part of their physical being as their arms or legs…When the convict stepped into the tub, the chain and its collection of grime went along with him” (174). Chessman and Bunker’s memoirs follow a more mainstream pattern found in modern prison literature: the alienated individual blending the confessional mode with the picaresque while adding socio-criminological commentary. In “The Subject and Power,” Foucault claims that the
struggle between the “criminals and the ‘good boys’” is one of many struggles which question the “status” of the individual:

On the one hand, [these struggles] assert the right to be different, and they underline everything which makes individuals truly individual. On the other hand, they attack everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way. (781)

Thus, the “criminal-subject” is born—manufactured. Both Bunker and Chessman grew up state-raised, under conditions where “prison is merely the natural consequence” (DP 301). We see their criminal exploits, their youthful indiscretions and so forth; they may have been having fun telling “war stories,” but clearly both writers knew that they needed to go deeper, that their hate and rebellion had to be reshaped, aestheticized such that “the head may be filled with blood but the writing won’t be” (Gornick 33).

Over the course of any memoir, the temporal distance between the “narrated-I” (the one who acts) and the “narrating-I” (the one who tells) will gradually diminish, until we reach what narratologists call “final convergence,” at which point the protagonist will have almost reached the point of possessing the reflective capabilities with which to effectively tell—a destination which, according to Vivian Gornick, author of The Situation and the Story, cannot occur successfully until the writer has adopted the proper “persona”: “It is the instrument of illumination. Without it there is neither subject nor story” (7). In the final pages of his book, Chessman describes for us the dawning of this period:
In my spare moments, I began to draft the story of my life. I tried to tell a story of how a psychopathic hate is born and what it can do; I ended by letting Hate tell the story. And I saw convincing proof Hate was not a very good storyteller. I found myself running out of days, so I tore up what I had written. (351)

One wonders how those discarded pages looked, how far he’d gotten before he realized that his compass was broken—a fairly keen insight for a self-described “former psychopath” who’d never written creatively before, and was learning from a segregated cell in San Quentin. Bunker narrates a similar moment when he says, “I was trying to make the reader see the world through the criminal’s perspective, what he saw, what he thought, what he felt—and why” (258). Here we have an insight as to how both writers, who describe themselves as hardened criminals throughout their works, were able to convince so many readers that they’d been reformed—not by the system, but by the writing. Chessman in particular understood that in order to reach an audience, he needed to replace his narrator—Hate—with something more palatable, so that “the narrator records his rage, yet the writing is not enraged” (Gornick 16). How smooth the drafting process went once Chessman found his voice is unknown to us, but we know that he worked on the manuscript, his first, for up to fourteen hours a day, and that *Cell 2455 Death Row* was a smash hit upon publication.

Bunker had a tougher go of it, at one point even selling his blood to take a correspondence course (126). He’d written six manuscripts over seventeen years, all unpublished, until he caught his big break with *No Beast So Fierce*. Once he’d given up his youthful propensity for “immediate satisfaction,” he’d become singularly focused: “I recognized that writing was my sole chance of creating something, of climbing from the
dark pit, fulfilling the dream, and resting in the sun” (127). Like Chessman, he’d realized
that his “rehabilitation” needed to be felt on the page, and though both writers are prone
to the occasional rant or sociological sermon, they ultimately remain focused on their
main objective: cultivating what I call the empathic persona. Gornick explains the
importance of the formula:

The empathy that allows us, the readers, to see the ‘other’ as the other might see
him or herself is the empathy that provides movement in the writing…Inevitably,
the piece builds only when the narrator is involved not in confession but in this
kind of self-investigation, the kind that means to provide motion, purpose, and
dramatic tension. (35)

All three writers adhere to this to some degree, though their methods differ. Chessman
composed nearly the first half of his thick book in the third person. Though he leaves no
doubt that the protagonist, “Whit,” is meant to be him, the device is clearly designed to
create a distance that produces a dual effect: to induce empathy in the reader for this
poor, misbegotten boy and, more importantly, to create a subject for whom Chessman can
express his own empathy. The early chapters are devoted almost exclusively to a series of
misfortunes which had left young Whit “hardened.” From his family’s financial troubles
(his first robbery, he claims, was motivated by a desire to provide a decent breakfast), to
his mother’s debilitating car accident, to his own bout with encephalitis—an event that
Chessman alleges derailed Whit’s promising music career and hence his future: “The
disease apparently destroyed, literally ate away, that portion of his brain which gave him
his tonal sense. He was left tone deaf. Except mechanically, he was never able to play
[the piano] again” (29). Chessman, whose empathic persona is displayed in the process,
establishes a psychological link between the hapless boy and the burgeoning criminal; if one identifies with the boy, one is by proxy identifying with the author.

But creating empathy for the protagonist alone wouldn’t be enough. For Chessman, society was fair game; however, indicting the system to which he so desperately wished to appeal was another matter. *His San Quentin* was the place where convicts “were treated like human beings, not caged wild animals” and where the warden was a “kindly, practical, far-seeing man” (218, 221)—a description that diverges considerably from the one depicted by Bunker, whose time in San Quentin overlapped with Chessman’s. But then, for Chessman, San Quentin was the last stop; either he’d write his way free or die there (which he did). Between his relentless writ-writing, his jailhouse lawyering, and his penchant for rabblerousing, Chessman had always been something of a nuisance; now that he was retrying his case in the court of public opinion, he seems to have realized that it behooved him to generate some empathy for his weary warders as well.

In the context of a prison memoir, a rebellious nature can be finessed into the kind of “self-investigatory” technique that Gornick argues is integral to the form: a state that approaches what Keats calls “negative capability”—a welcoming of, or engagement with, one’s overriding sense of uncertainty. The protagonist in a prison memoir is engaged in a prolonged existential struggle, which the narrator attempts to unpack over the course of the narrative. Often the narrator will go into reflective mode—confessing and ruminating over “big picture” questions, implicating oneself and society, being critical of both:

Was I simply bad? I’d certainly done bad things, and a few that made me feel terrible to recall, and God knows that terrible things had been done to me—in the
name of society or somebody. I’d suffered beatings and torture in a state
hospital….How many punches and kicks I’d gotten from authority figures over
my brief life was beyond estimation. Had I declared war on society, or had society
declared war on me? (Bunker 114)

Or this from Chessman (commenting on the plight of young “Whit”):

He adapted and he hardened. He looked out for himself. He had the guts and the
cunning and the flexibility to do that. And he didn’t mind getting hurt, getting his
face beaten out of shape….But look what happened to those who were less
cunning, who couldn’t stand physical pain, who couldn’t resist the tyranny of
those who specialized in degradation. Well, if society didn’t seem to care what
happened to them, why should he? (93)

In putting their coldness and criminality into the context of the brutalities that they’d
endured, Bunker and Chessman are complicating matters in a way that Burns, who
wasn’t a career criminal, didn’t have to. When Burns declares that “Georgia may say that
I escaped justice, I emphatically state that I am convinced that I escaped from injustice”
(199)—it’s hard to argue. All three convicts establish empathy as an organizing
principle—using it throughout their narratives to argue for reformation of some sort. The
difference is that, while Chessman and Bunker go from the specific to the general, Burns
does the opposite. Here’s Chessman, reflecting on his “hate” prior to his anagnorisis: “I
knew the hate was still bottled inside me, that it would soon find release…I became
aware of an ironical truth: the strongest, most powerful man in the world is no more a
free agent than the weakest and least powerful” (266). Or Bunker’s overture to racial
unity: “I really wished that everyone was oblivious to race and, absent that, everyone
should be civil and respectful to everyone else. It is impossible to have a civil society without civility” (272). But with Burns, the plight of “all convicts” is always prioritized: “All the convicts get is abuse, curses, punishment, and filth. In a few weeks all are reduced to the same level, just animals, and treated worse than animals” (56). Only then does he report his own degradation in greater detail: “I did not wash my hands and face, or comb my hair or change my clothes until Saturday, when we got a bath” (ibid).

All three writers are attempting “the sublimation of the individual in a henceforth universal good” (Camus 15)—they’re just going about it in slightly different ways. Bunker and Chessman are classic “antiheros”; in order for the empathic effect to resonate, the writing requires a greater degree of self-implication, an “awareness that clarifies only slowly in the writer, gaining strength and definition as the narrative progresses” (Gornick 92). The argument that their “delinquency” was the result of the abuses that they’d endured, not the cause, needed to unfold gradually over the course of the narrative; any empathy that the writing inculcates is built up over many scenes depicting the brutality of the system into which they were “indoctrinated.” For prisoners like Chessman and Bunker, spending the bulk of their lives in prison was a foregone conclusion: “an obvious destiny if ever one existed” (Bunker 94).

With Burns, the empathy is foregrounded for “the convict” as a being, a sufferer, and only then are we asked to identify with him as a subject, one whose narrative doesn’t require that he be “redeemed” per se. It’s not that Burns hides his flaws (it was his marital indiscretion that led to his recapture), but his creative motor is more of a “righteous rebellion” aimed at an unjust system that “merely demands its pound of flesh” (Burns 257). In the final pages of his book, Burns uses a line of dialogue to make sure that no
one misses his motive: “It’s now my life’s ambition to destroy the chain gang system in Georgia, and see substituted in its place a more humane and enlightened system of correction” (251). Thus, he viewed his writing as both a weapon and a form of activism—contributing to some small degree, perhaps, to the goal that the modern prison memoir has thus far been unable to achieve: abolition of the institution.

With the exception of Burns (who, with two daring escapes, managed to shave years off his sentence), these writers were locked up for a substantial amount of time, shunned by society, oppressed by the drudgery and brutality of the disciplinary regime, deprived of anything resembling empathy. Thus, one might be tempted to suggest (if one wishes to be cynical) that these texts benefit somewhat from the “oyster theory”: the idea that “great art is like a pearl, something that can be produced only out of suffering and agony” (Franklin 30). But that would be to suggest that the content of the prison experience is enough to produce great art, which most certainly isn’t the case, or as Camus puts it, “suffering has no more meaning than happiness” (261). Prison material may be rich in the literary sense, but the content alone cannot conjure, let alone rewrite, the human spirit: “[T]he articulation of hope against the imposed textuality of incarceration” (Davies 109). Writer-prisoners are attempting to rewrite what the apparatus that has inscribed upon them, to undo the “network of writing” that “engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (Foucault, DP 189).

“Those who write in prison are not dead,” writes Davies, “though their lives are sharpened by the sense of death and the apprehension of violence” (18). Prison literature is hardly homogenous, but the vast majority of it is dynamic and raw—for lack of a better word, real.
Carrie (can help me). – In addition to the four counts of possession with intent to
distribute, the cops decided to tack on a few “companion charges”: padding designed to
boost the DA’s bargaining power. According to my copy of the arrest report, one of these
was “Use of a Structure to Suppress Law Enforcement.” When I first saw that I thought,
huh? What structure: the apartment itself, the goddamn walls? As charges go, it seemed
rather whiny and vindictive, as though I’d offended the cops personally, bummed them
out. True, I had hoped to evade authorities, but had I actively suppressed them? And if
so, so what? Where in the Constitution does it say that an alleged criminal is required to
be accommodating?

The charge, it turned out, was bunk. When I moved into my apartment, there were
metal hooks bolted to either side of the back door, between which a batten could be
placed. How effective a buttress, I never knew; no one ever tried to force entry. But that
was the culprit here: a cheap pair of hooks and an ordinary two-by four. Apparently, such
a device could be considered illegal if it were specifically employed as a bulwark against
the cops.

When I inspected the hooks, I found a sticker on one of them that said Baller. I
knew Baller Hardware; it was just up the road on Hyperion. I snapped a few photos with
my digital camera, hoping to get a clear shot of what appeared to be an item number, but
it didn’t read, so I just wrote the number down and took a ride over. I spoke to a long-
term employee. “We haven’t used those stickers in eight years,” he said. So now I had
proof that the device predated my tenancy. But what was I going to do, subpoena this guy
from the hardware store?
I did have an option. There was someone who was present during this key transition: a live-in lover who stood by me as I morphed from a square salesman into a bed-headed and bleary-eyed coke dealer, sleeping twitchily with my phone beside my head.

Her name was Carrie. That the romance survived my foray into dealing is, I think, indicative of how special she was, how keenly she dissected the various mes, but I was too aloof to appreciate that. My customer base was growing, and I was on the periphery of a gritty kind of glamour: wild parties, beach houses, minor celebrities. I felt like a Dickensian kid staring into the store window. Awestruck by the goodies, I simply lost sight of Carrie.

But now I needed her. She knew the history of those hooks. I asked the public defender, once I got her on the phone, and she confirmed that a sworn statement from Carrie verifying the preexistence of the so-called “suppression device” would surely result in the charge being dropped. She’d even be willing to send an investigator, she said, which struck me as acutely aggressive for a PD. All Carrie had to do was answer a few questions, maybe sign a form. So that’s all that stood between me and this additional charge: calling on an ex-girlfriend. And groveling.

“They’re trying to charge you with what now?” she said.

“Fortifying the backdoor—in furtherance of a criminal enterprise.”

“Wait, are you talking about those hooks?”

“Yeah.”

“No, no. Those were there before.”
Bingo. Now all I had to do was mention, delicately, that I’d mentioned her. She reacted hysterically. *What did you say?!* I told her to relax, that she wasn’t in any trouble. “I just need you to talk to the investigator, answer a few questions. You don’t have to go to court or anything. Just tell the truth, you can handle that.”

“Well, I guess so, she said, “but what if they ask about the drugs?” The investigator would be for the defense, I explained, there’d be no “gotcha questions.” If they ask about drugs or drug dealing, I said, just say you never saw anything. “I can’t lie to cops,” she said, “I get nervous.” *They’re not cops, goddammit!* I took a breath and composed myself. I explained again that it was just an investigator, probably an intern or something. “You would like to see me do *less* time in jail, wouldn’t you?” She said yeah.

“So you’ll help me then?”

“I won’t lie.”

“You won’t have to. Drugs aren’t even relevant to the issue. For all they know, we broke up before any *alleged* dealing.”

“But that’s why I broke it off.”

“Huh?”

“That’s why I left you: because you started dealing.”
CHAPTER 3

DECONSTRUCTING DOSTOEVSKY

I waited for freedom, I cried for it to come quickly; I wanted to put myself to the test again, to renew the struggle....All this, of course, concerns nobody but myself. – Fyodor Dostoevsky

A mere twelve pages in to his 360-page fictionalized memoir, Memoirs from the House of the Dead, Dostoevsky previews the slipperiness of the work’s overarching motif, human freedom:

There were some rugged and unyielding characters who found it difficult and had to force themselves, but they did submit. Some who came to the prison had burst all bounds, broken through every restraint, when they were free, so that in the end their very crimes were committed, as it were, not of their own volition but as though they did not know why they had acted so, as though they were delirious or possessed [...] “We are a lost people,” they said, “we did not know how to live in freedom.” (Memoirs 12)

Even in this short piece of exposition, we have “unyielding characters” submitting before the next sentence can even commence. We see them, these Russian commoners, bursting “all bounds,” and breaking through “every restraint,” prior to being imprisoned, not after. And none of this, our narrator claims, is “of their own volition,” but as though they were “delirious or possessed.” Not in control of their faculties (and hence not free). To round out these metaphorical restraints which seemingly exist independently of incarceration, we get a chorus of sorts, an implied pleading for leniency reminiscent of Luke 23:34:
Father forgive them, for they know not what they do...they did not know how to live in freedom.

Freedom is the ideal, made possible only by its supplement, originary unfreedom. I want to argue that Dostoevsky’s text shows that even when the peasant is “free,” he still feels an absence, an incompleteness in need of supplementation. Freedom becomes the “absent presence” (or the presence of an absence) which gives Dostoevsky’s narrator the idealization of a full freedom, which, in its fleeting absence, he can barely imagine and never actually articulate. The mere concept of “freedom,” I argue, continually slips away from the narrator like so much sand through one’s fingers; with this specific opposition or difference—freedom/unfreedom—the “exterior,” deprivileged term (unfreedom) continues to sneak back into any attempt to fortify or secure the privileged term (freedom). In short, both terms are always already at work as an opposition, with the hierarchized term depending on the other for its identity. What our narrator is in effect chasing is the primary source or “origin” of freedom, that which imbues it with meaning—the supplement. “The ‘unmotivatedness’ of the sign” argues Jacques Derrida, “requires a synthesis in which the completely other is announced as such—without any simplicity, any identity, any resemblance of continuity—within what is not it” (OG 47).

In Derridean terms, the “supplement” refers to that which provides the metaphysical concept of “freedom” with the illusion of presence, the idea that it exists prior to and independently of its opposite. Clearly, as our excerpt demonstrates, this cannot be the case. There is no pure “freedom” prior to or independent of (literal or metaphorical) prison, regardless of how doggedly our narrator attempts to capture it, to solidify it, to make it whole. I’ll attempt to demonstrate how Dostoevsky’s text
repeatedly deconstructs itself on this point; this feedback loop of freedom, the attempt to harness what clearly doesn’t exist in any containable form, serves as the basis for the aporia at the heart of the work, linked, inextricably, to its individualist ideology.

*Memoirs from the House of the Dead*10 consists of a series of “sketches,” a fictionalized form resembling loose autobiography, inspired by Dostoevsky’s stint in a prison camp in Omsk—a period during which, biographers of the author claim, Dostoevsky, a “noble” by birth, abandoned the idealism of his youth for a more conservative brand of individualism, an ethos described by Joseph Frank, author of a series of books on the author, as “autonomy of personality”: “His prison solitude had proven to him that the autonomy of the human personality could be a living reality […] It was only when he arrived at the prison camp, and was forced to live cheek-by-jowl with the peasant-convicts, that some of his earlier opinions were directly challenged; only then did he begin to realize to what extent he had been a dupe of illusions about the Russian peasant and the nature of Russian social-political reality” (*Ordeal* 88). Geoffrey Kabat, author of *Ideology and Imagination: The Image of Society in Dostoevsky*, argues that Dostoevsky had, as a result of his imprisonment, developed “a new sense of the density of the society within which the individual life is lived,” and that he had “learned a lesson in class consciousness at the hands of the peasant convicts” (54-5).

But this lesson seems to have resulted, at least initially, in a somewhat cynical, elitist attitude toward the Russian peasantry, one that the younger Dostoevsky—author of *Poor Folk*, member of the Petrashevsky Circle—hadn’t harbored. One of his earliest realizations upon entering the prison was that his preconceived notion of “rank” seemed to operate in reverse: “It was just as if the status of convict, of condemned man,

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10 Otherwise translated as *Notes from the house of the Dead* or simply *Notes from a Dead House*.
constituted some kind of rank, and that an honorable one. Not a sign of shame or remorse!” (13). The tone here is somewhere between bemused and astonished (assuming the faithfulness of the translation, which is more salient: the “as if” or the exclamation point?). The idea that being a criminal could be a badge of honor—unthinkable! If this weren’t a running theme throughout the book, perhaps we could write it off as an aside, a musing. But it’s a leitmotif: “The hatred which I, as a gentleman, constantly experienced from the convicts during my first years in prison became unbearable and my whole life was poisoned with venom” (272). Even in the final pages the narrator is still lamenting “the changes in habits, the mode of life, food, and other things, which are of course harder to bear for a man from the higher strata of society than for a peasant, who when he was free not infrequently went hungry and who in prison at least eats his fill” (307, my emphasis). A peasant is free, that is, to “not infrequently” go hungry.

This notion of “rank” becomes a prism through which we can interrogate the theme proper: freedom. The interconnectedness of these binaries (serf/nobleman, free/unfree) is as old as prison literature itself, making its first appearance in Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy, generally regarded as being the original prison memoir. Much of Books II and III of the Consolation are concerned primarily with the argument that rank itself is an illusion, which “when conferred upon unrighteous men, not only does not make them honorable, but more than this, it betrays them and shows them up as dishonorable” (41). True repression cannot be implemented, Boethius argues, over a “spirit that is free” because the power of the tyrant is both unjust and ephemeral. As for the binaries themselves, Boethius is unequivocal: “For it is not in the habit of opposites to join themselves together; Nature distains the conjunction of pairs of opposites. Therefore,
since there can be no doubt that the most despicable people are commonly installed in positions of power, then this is clear: Those things are not good in their own nature that allow themselves to attach to despicable people” (40).

Dostoevsky, when describing these same “despicable people,” retains the binary in all its materiality while simultaneously complicating his own metaphysics of freedom: “Officer’s rank seems to turn their inner selves, and their heads as well, upside down [yet] with their superiors they display a servility which is completely unnecessary and even distasteful to many superior officers….But in relation to inferior ranks they are almost absolute dictators” (133). The question here, as always, is the utility of the supplement; if this display of servility—which implies a lack of freedom—were “completely unnecessary,” adding nothing, then it would be truly superfluous; yet we still toil with these fools, watch them squirm as they “live this almost impossible experience, that is almost alien to the constraints of supplementarity, already as a supplement, as a compensation” (Derrida, OG 250, his emphasis).

As Boethius so coolheadedly points out, “political rank and power are externally conferred upon a person and are not anything other than an arbitrary and transitory gift of Fortune” (165). The compulsion to compensate for a lack—an “externally conferred upon” rank—creates, according to French theorists Deleuze and Guattari, a subject who is “fantasy-produced.” It’s not the object that’s missing, but the subject who latches onto desire, and desire “does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression” (AO 26). Thus, these subjects, these “men of rank,” are (like us all, perhaps) the mere residuum of repression. (From this we might deduce the
syllogism: repression inhibits freedom/we are all repressed/therefore, we are not free subjects.) Material rank, like (metaphysical) freedom, is a fantasy, externally conferred, a compensation, a supplement. Such oppositional logic (superior/inferior, free/unfree) becomes entirely unsustainable: titles conferred upon officers reveal a trace of mediations and differences, each opening up the possibility of the other while simultaneously closing them off. Every attempt at representation is undermined by a surreptitious appeal to that which is unrepresentable; servile one minute, dictatorial the next: who among these fools was ever “free” to begin with? “In this play of representation,” Derrida reminds us, “the point of origin becomes ungraspable” (OG 36).

In short, Dostoevsky had formulated what he perceived to be a more refined concept of freedom, away from his youthful idealisms of Russian brotherhood and comradeship, and towards something that, years later, the “underground man” would describe as the “most advantageous advantage,” or “what is most precious and most important—that is, our personality, our individuality” (Notes 20). Yet this concept of individual liberty is repeatedly undermined by the logic of the supplement, the trace: that which reveals an inherent lack within what postulates as a moment of pure presence. “The peasant in freedom works,” Dostoevsky\(^\text{11}\) claims, “incomparably harder and sometimes even far into the night […] but he works for himself and for reasonable ends, and it is infinitely easier for him than for the convict doing forced labor without any advantage to himself” (24). From a temporal standpoint, there are two ways of situating

\(^{11}\) “The accepted view” according to Frank, “is that Dostoevsky introduced Goryanchikov primarily as a means of avoiding trouble with the censorship, and that he did not expect his readers to take him as more than a convenient device” (Liberation 219). That the book is “universally accepted as more or less a faithful account of Dostoevsky’s own past as a political prisoner” (ibid) is evidenced further by Dostoevsky’s return to the narrative, without the pretense of a fictional narrator, years later in “The Peasant Marey” (which we’ll be looking at later).
this argument: from the viewpoint of Dostoevsky during the mid-1850s, when he would have been mixing with these peasants, or from his writer’s desk in the early 1860s, at which point the serfs had finally been emancipated, a “landmark in Russian history” during which, “in order to modernize, the country had to go through a period of ‘primitive accumulation’” (Kabat 5). Either way, it’s difficult to interpret Dostoevsky’s description of the “free peasant” as anything but an oxymoron. Kabat himself alludes to the implications of this “eruption” in terms of crime: “If crime has its origin in the eruption of the repressed craving for self-expression on the part of the peasants, by implication the world outside prison is not very different from the world inside from their point of view” (Kabat 64). Kabat’s insight here seems unintentionally tautological; what he refers to here and elsewhere as a “repressed craving for self-expression” could easily be rewritten as an “unrepressed realization of unfreedom.” The peasants know they’re not free—they’re fully aware that “the world outside prison is not very different from the world inside.”

Yet this is precisely the problem that Dostoevsky and others had been wrestling with at the time. Marx, who had been working on his own “sketches” from a garret somewhere in Paris, had described wage labor in Europe as “not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor” (Marx, EPM 74). And as with Europe years earlier, Russian peasants were being “forced off the land and into factories, where they were reduced to wage slaves earning barely enough to keep them alive and working” (Kabat 6). Thus, Dostoevsky’s depiction of the peasant working “for himself and for reasonable ends” while reserving “forced labor” for the convict strikes us as tone deaf at best, even by nineteenth century standards.
Of course, we needn’t venture outside of Dostoevsky’s text to deconstruct; the nearest about-face occurs at the end of the very next chapter:

There were even men who deliberately commit a crime simply in order to be sent to penal servitude and thus escape the incomparably harsher servitude of freedom. ‘Outside’ this man existed in the last stages of destitution, he never ate his fill, he toiled for his employer from morning till night; in prison, work is easier, he can eat to his heart’s content; the food is better than he has ever known; there is beef on holidays…” (60).

How to square this with the earlier account? It betrays what Derrida calls the “originary lack” or *arche-freedom*, the “the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance” (*OG* 112). Freedom is proving to be much more elusive, more malleable, more in need of supplementation, than the earlier chapter had led us to believe.

Earlier still, Dostoevsky had attempted to reify freedom by equating it with cash: “Money is coined freedom, and thus is ten times as dear to a man deprived of all other freedom” (19). One wonders how to begin the process of delineation: how to separate the *money* freedom from “all other” forms (whatever they might consist of, and however they might be quantified). We get a kind of clarification at the opening of the next chapter: “[T]he prisoner delights in money and esteems it more than anything else, almost equally with freedom” (43). And later, “What is it that ranks higher than money for the convict? Freedom, or at any rate, some illusion of freedom” (95).
Two things, according to the text, should be clear by now: while some illusionary version can be purchased inside, the only true and present freedom exists outside of prison walls, for the “whole idea of the word prisoner postulates a man without free will; but when he flings away money the prisoner is acting of his own free will” (ibid, emphasis his). For the prisoner on a binge, flinging copecks about and downing adulterated vodka, the idea is to “pretend to his fellows (and even to convince himself, for however short a time) that he has more will-power and authority than he appears to have” (ibid, emphasis his). One wonders who enjoys more freedom: the average Russian citizen living in destitution or the convict flush with cash. Either way, our definition is getting increasingly knotty, steeped as it is in “the suppression of contradiction and difference” (OG 115). Could it be that the prisoner is, for his money, buying an illusion of a nonexistent commodity? An illusion of an illusion? Might freedom have no stable meaning? Could the entire concept be simply and forever caught up in the endless play of signification? And, to that point, suppose that the prison merely emerges from a gap—an “originary lack”—at the core of freedom itself. What if the call is coming from inside the house?

We suspect that the precarity of the freedom/unfreedom binary is itself embedded within a larger conception—an overarching duality that Dostoevsky seemed to have struggled with throughout this period and beyond: that of society versus the individual. At times, the author of the Memoirs digresses into the virtues of personal responsibility, the likes of which wouldn’t be out of place on any right-leaning reddit thread: “It is high time for us to stop our apathetic complaining that our environment has ruined us […] [A]

12 I’m tempted to blame the clunky verbiage here on the translation; it should probably read: “that he appears to have more will-power and authority than he actually does.”
clever and accomplished rogue will often use the influence of his environment to cover
and excuse not only his weakness but his evil doing as well, especially if he has the gift
of fine speech or writing” (218). But how to square this, then, with another digression in
the very next chapter, one that indictes the “contagions of power” on an almost
Foucauldian level: “[This] despotism is a temptation. A society which contemplates such
manifestations calmly is already corrupted at the roots” (237). Whether or not
Dostoevsky experienced corporal punishment at the hands of these “tyrants” is a matter
of some debate, but it can’t be ignored that these “ulcers of society” are being described
during the same period that the author was wrestling with dialectical materialism,
somewhat ham-handedly, in his journalism:

This very rebellious and demanding individual […] must above all sacrifice all of
his I, his entire self, to society, and not only without demanding his rights, but, on
the contrary, giving them up to society unconditionally. But the Western
personality is not used to such rights; it wants to be separate—and so brotherhood
does not come. Of course, it may be regenerated. But it takes thousands of years
to accomplish this regeneration, for such ideas must first enter into the flesh and
blood in order to become a reality. (WN 48-9)

There’s a subtle sleight of hand at play here; notice how the sovereign “I”—the “Western
personality”—becomes susceptible to a “demanding” society hell-bent on usurping
individual liberty. But then this vague goal of “brotherhood,” which may or may not be
accomplished, seems contingent upon the amount of time allocated toward

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13 Again, even if we grant that this is a “novel” and that the author and narrator should not be collapsed
into one, it bears repeating that both were members of the nineteenth-century Russian noble class and
hence pampered, educated, and basically exempted from poverty. Thus, we find these libertarian rantings
to be rather fitting, if not entirely compelling.
“regeneration.” Whether or not the “thousands of years” strikes us as arbitrarily quantified, the implication is that nature is vulnerable to corruption by time. Seemingly, nature plus time equals culture.

Here, also, we glimpse the germ of the underground man, whose monologue on the “theory of the regeneration of mankind” occupies its own digression in the novella: “What man wants is simply independent choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead” (18). It is our assertion that Dostoevsky, like so many great philosophers before him, struggled to reconcile society with the individual—what Freud described as the “reality principle”—and that his largely psychological approach to the problem accounts for what he calls the “hair in the mechanism”: that which finds its way into the gap and threatens to “crack and destroy everything” (WN 49). What had obsessed the likes of Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss—and hence so much of what succumbs to deconstruction in the texts of Derrida—is this idea that culture corrupts nature from the outside. But how could this be? How could the state of nature—so Edenic and full as a “being-in-itself”—even be susceptible to such an intrusion? Why would culture have manifested in the first place if it weren’t already endemic to nature? Likewise, why is it that whenever we encounter “freedom” with Dostoevsky does he always mean “more, less, or something other than he would mean” if freedom existed in a pure state? (OG 158).

This brings us to the centerpiece of my argument, the point at which even the pretense of an “original” freedom can no longer be maintained. What follows is Dostoevsky’s depiction of a peasant run amok, a “free” citizen caught up in the metaphysical feedback loop:
It is as if the man were intoxicated or in the grip of a raging fever. As if, having once transgressed the boundary that has been sacred for him, he begins to revel in the fact that for him there is no longer anything sacred; as if he had been carried away by overleaping at one bound all the restrictions of legality and authority, tasting the sweets of the most unbridled and infinite liberty, and knowing the pleasure of those pangs of terror of himself which it is impossible for him not to feel. He knows, in addition, that a terrible punishment awaits him. (129)

This of course echoes our opening excerpt, the depiction of the “free” peasant in a state of “delirium” or “possession,” bursting “all bounds” and breaking “through every restraint.” This has been the problem all along, hasn’t it? How, even outside of prison, can there be true freedom if our conscious lives are essentially epiphenomenal? If what rises to the level of consciousness is simply an effect of our deterministic instincts? The fact that Dostoevsky repeatedly resorts to confinement metaphors in order to harness, linguistically, the metaphysical “sweets of the most unbridled and infinite liberty”—what could be more indicative of the emperor’s nakedness? Even Nietzsche (who we know was smitten with Dostoevsky) would be at pains to disentangle this incoherent muddling of forces: human, all too human, yet caught up in the infinite play of signification. “It is *we* alone,” Nietzsche says, “who have devised cause, sequence, reciprocity, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose; and when we interpret and intermix this symbol-world as ‘being-in-itself,’ with things, we act once more as we have always acted—*mythologically*” (EN 28).

It isn’t merely *precarious*, this concept of freedom; it never existed pristinely on one side of a wall and then, for a price, as an illusion on the other. It is and always was
mythological. And this was something that Dostoevsky struggled with throughout this entire “transition period” between the early novels (Poor Folk, The Double) of the 1840s and the “great novels” (Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov) of the 1860s. Frank, his biographer, alludes to this without quite putting his finger on the problem:

Always preoccupied with the deformations of character caused by lack of freedom, Dostoevsky had explored this theme in his early stories; but there he had barely scratched the surface. Life in [the] prison camp gave him a unique vantage point from which to study human beings living under extreme psychic pressure, and responding to such pressure with the most frenzied behavior. (Ordeal 146)

But we need only to look at the text to see that this “extreme psychic pressure” and “frenzied behavior” antedated the prison experience. This idea of freedom as a “being-in-itself,” pure and uncorrupted by cultural forces—is a myth. Derrida could be talking about his very thing when he argues that “the thing itself is thus undermined, in its act and in its essence, by frustration. One cannot therefore say that it has an essence or an act….Something promises itself as it escapes, called presence. Such is the constraint of the supplement, such, exceeding all the language of metaphysics, is this structure ‘almost inconceivable to reason’” (OG 154). During this same period, Dostoevsky was arguing, both in his journalism and his fiction, that reason (utilitarianism, rational egoism) taken to its logical conclusion would result in a lack of personal freedom. He devoted a great deal of space in his relatively short travelogue, Winter Notes on Summer Impressions, to the argument that Russian flirtation with European rationalist/socialist ideology was foolhardy:
Of course, there is a great attraction in living, if not on a brotherly basis, then on a purely rational basis, that is, in living well, when they guarantee everything and demand only your labor and your consent […] But no, a man does not want to live even according to these calculations, for even a little drop is hard for him to give up. In his foolishness it seems to him that this is a prison and that he is better off all by himself, because that way he is free. And in his freedom, you know, he is beaten, he is offered no work, he dies of hunger, and he has no freedom at all; and yet, it seems to this odd fellow that he is better off with his freedom. (51, my emphasis)

The contemporary reader is of course familiar with this well-worn, hyperbolic argument: anything short of unfettered free market capitalism amounts to prison, and “the people” will never stand for it. Yet here again—as the italicized portion attests—a precise conception of freedom cannot even survive the duration of a sentence, let alone a body of work. Soon after, Dostoevsky would take this thesis to satirical heights with his underground man persona:

Shower upon him every earthly blessing […] give him economic prosperity, such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes, and busy himself with the continuation of his species, and then even out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick […] It is just his fantastic dreams, his vulgar folly that he will desire to retain, simply in order to prove to himself—as though that were so necessary—that men are still men and not the keys of a piano…. (Notes 21)
Tempted as we may be to dismiss these as the rantings of a fictional misanthrope, scholars agree that his was essentially the author’s basic philosophy: “Faced with the choice of preserving the full autonomy of personality or surrendering part of it in order to obtain some self-advantage, mankind, Dostoevsky firmly believed, would instinctively choose suffering and hardship for the sake of freedom” (Frank, Liberation 246). We can see the seeds of this philosophy taking shape in the Memoirs as he describes the desperate peasants’ state of mind:

The more subdued they were previously, the more strongly they are moved to swagger and try to inspire terror now. They relish the terror and enjoy even the disgust they arouse in others. They affect a kind of desperation, and a man so ‘desperate’ is sometimes eager for punishment, eager to have his fate decided, because at last it becomes difficult for him to bear the weight of this assumed desperation. (129, his emphasis)

Yet, we notice, this “desperation” has nothing to do with the peasant being unfree. On the contrary, this is Dostoevsky’s depiction of the peasant who “could not live in freedom.”

Now we’re getting to the core of the problem, the “performative contradiction,” as Derrida would say. It would seem that, for the peasant, it is unfettered freedom that induces “delirium,” “possession,” and “grips of raging fever.” But for the nobleman, it’s precisely the opposite. Whether it’s the thinly-veiled “narrator” of his prison memoirs, his journalistic persona, or his “educated” underground man, Dostoevsky envisages the same sort of spiteful outrage as the logical consequence of an encroaching lack of freedom.

*Freedom for me, but not for thee!*
It is the inherent instability of the peasant/nobleman binary that drives the entire mythology—a precarity of hierarchy that runs all through Dostoevsky’s writings from this period. Commenting on the sadistic behavior of the one of the higher-ranking prison officers, Dostoevsky says, “A man like the major must always have someone to oppress, something to take away from somebody, somebody to deprive of his rights, in short, an opportunity of wreak havoc” (Memoirs 176). And in the following chapter, this bit of (confessional) narration:

I always wanted to do everything for myself and was particularly anxious not even to seem to put myself forward as a soft-handed and womanish creature playing the fine gentleman. In fact, to be honest, some part of my self-esteem depended on this attitude. But—and I decidedly do not understand why this always happened—I could never shake off the various servitors and hangers-on who attached themselves to me and finally got me completely in their power, so that in reality they were my masters and I was their servant…. (205)

And then we have this curious bit of narration from the Winter Notes: “Not long ago I heard that a certain landowner of our day has also begun to wear the Russian costume in order to blend in with the people and to attend local meetings in it: as soon as they see him, they say to each other, ‘Who is that mummer hanging around here?’” (14). It would seem that the nobleman, whether he is oppressing the peasant, endeavoring to ingratiate himself to him, or merely trying to blend in—he is never “present.” Neither the serf nor the nobleman, we see, has fallen from a state of freedom into unfreedom, a state of mastery into servitude or vice versa. All of this stems from a crisis within “freedom” itself.
We could speculate that Dostoevsky’s muddled relationship with freedom is rooted in his ideological ambivalence upon emerging from Siberia. Four years in Omsk, another five in the Russian army—reacclimating to St. Petersburg’s high(er) society was bound to be precarious, and the struggling writer immediately found himself in another kind of prison: that of his editors. Feeling besmirched both creatively and culturally, Dostoevsky decided to start his own journal, Vremya, with his brother, Mikhail (who, because of Fyodor’s status as an ex-con, assumed primacy on the masthead). The journal’s mission statement championed “pochvennichestvo”: a sort of blended ideology that basically embraced the Petrine reforms while eschewing encroaching Westernism. Slavophilism was fine, so long as it emerged naturally through the writing, avoiding didacticism and clichés. Contributors’ texts would be subject to an “organic criticism” that would keep them as pure as possible, unhindered by the pedantry of traditional editing (Chances 154, passim). Literature should shoot for some sort of ideological sweet spot: avoiding both utilitarianism and the vacuousness of “art for art’s sake.” Dostoevsky envisioned his fledgling journal as a vehicle for a “new form” for the Russian people: “taken from our soil, taken from our national spirit and our national origins” (Polnoe Sobranie 13: 498, quoted in Chances 152).

Simply put, the writing should reflect the world of the commoner, the “man of the soil,” and thus the nobleman (the traditional audience) will come to develop a deeper understanding of the peasant’s plight. Meanwhile the common man (the new target

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14 According to Susan Fusso, Dostoevsky complained that he’d been reduced to a “‘proletarian,’ dependent on the good will of editors” (196).
15 While in prison, Dostoevsky had reembraced Christianity (his only reading material was the New Testament), the importance of which, in terms of his oeuvre, need not be reiterated here. Basically, Dostoevsky believed that literature should embody “the ideal of a particular epoch,” and that ideal was “narodnost”—the fidelity to Russian heritage tinged with Christian values (Chances 160, 162).
audience), through his identification with the material, will come to develop a taste for the arts: both sides meet in the middle and everyone wins. However well-intentioned Dostoevsky and his team may have been, though, an inevitable contradiction emerged: an increasing emphasis on morality engendered an (inorganic) dip into didacticism: unbridled art opened the door and utility crept back in (ibid 163). Freedom, it seems, was binding: the unshakable aporia at the heart of one too many Dostoevskian projects.

Of all of the binaries (nature/culture, good/evil, speech/writing), Derrida argues that “one in particular requires our special notice […] Among all these representations, the exteriority of liberty and nonliberty is perhaps privileged. More clearly than others, it brings together the historical (political, economic, technological) and the metaphysical” (OG 168). Or, as Rousseau routinely argued, the natural and the cultural: “Our inner conflicts are caused by these contradictions. Drawn this way by nature and that way by man, compelled to yield, to both forces, we make a compromise and reach neither goal” (Emile 9). Destined to fall between the proverbial barstools of liberty and nonliberty, we “go through life, struggling and hesitating, and die before we have found peace, useless to ourselves and to others” (ibid).

All through the Memoirs, the concept of freedom is chimerical, fetishized with a dreamlike quality: “From the very first day of my life in prison I had begun to dream of freedom. Calculating when my term would come to an end became my favorite occupation […] I am sure that everyone deprived of liberty for a fixed term must behave in the same way” (114-115). Towards the end, however, we do get something new, something along the lines of that refined concept, that freedom is indeed ungraspable—that Dostoevsky’s fetishization of it may have been little more than a dream: “I will
mention here in passing that, in consequence of our daydreams and our long divorce from it, freedom somehow seemed to us freer than freedom, the freedom, that is, that exists in fact, in real life. The prisoners exaggerated the idea of real freedom, and that is very natural and characteristic of all prisoners” (359).

We might consider this to be a foreshadowing of sorts, a conversion-in-process that appears to have taken place in Dostoevsky’s heart, even if it took him two decades to finally document it. “The Peasant Marey” appears amidst a series of sketches compiled in A Writers Diary, many of them autobiographical. In this particular sketch, Dostoevsky essentially reprises his narratorial role from the Memoirs. The setup is a typically raucous Easter week at the prison camp, during which the prisoners were particularly rowdy and drunk and violent, annoying Dostoevsky to no end. Disgusted with the riffraff, the twenty-nine-year-old nobleman flees the barracks, only to return fifteen minutes later, intent on feigning sleep and hopefully escaping molestation. The essence of the story is embedded in the framing: one of many soul-crushing experiences at Omsk catalyzes a Proustian “madeleine moment” in which Dostoevsky retreats, subconsciously, into the safe haven of his childhood: “These memories arose in my mind; rarely did I summon them up consciously. They would begin from a certain point, some little thing that was often barely perceptible, and then bit by bit they would grow into a finished picture, some strong and complete impression” (PM 2). The complete impression in this case materializes into the vivid memory of an excursion into the woods near his childhood home. “Summer was on the wane,” Dostoevsky writes, “and soon I would have to go back to Moscow to spend the whole winter in boredom over my French lessons” (Ibid 3).
Thus, the setup to the memory proper mirrors the circumstance under which it was catalyzed: lack of freedom. The crux of the story involves a hallucination: the young Dostoevsky imagines a wolf coming for him through the woods, a potentially traumatic experience from which he’s “rescued” by one of the family serfs, Marey. At this point the narrative slows down and the exposition gives way to scenic detail:

[Marey] stretched out his hand and stroked my cheek. “Never mind, now, there’s nothing to be afraid of. Christ be with you. Cross yourself, lad.” But I couldn’t cross myself; the corners of my mouth were trembling, and I think this particularly struck him. He quietly stretched out a thick, earth-soiled finger with a black nail and gently touched it to my trembling lips. (ibid)

Reassured, the somewhat embarrassed boy slinks away, careful to look over his shoulder every few steps to engage with Marey and his “maternal smile.” He reiterates the image of the “finger soiled with dirt” and the “trembling lips.” The scene itself covers barely a page, but so engrossed are we by now that that we’ve nearly forgotten about the frame: that the whole point of this story—written by Dostoevsky when he was in his mid-fifties—was that the involuntary memory had been triggered, initially, by the twenty-nine-year-old prisoner’s attempt at escape, if only for a moment, into the comfort of his childhood. But why this memory at this particular moment? And, more importantly, why had he left such a salient memory out of the Memoirs of the House of the Dead? He’d covered the same time period, Easter week, with some similar narration, even hinting at one point that fonder memories had in fact been percolating:

I did not see the good people, the people who were capable of both thinking and feeling, in spite of the repulsive crust that covered them on the surface. Among all
the wounding words I never noticed the affectionate kind word, which was all the
dearer because it was spoken without any ulterior motive, and not infrequently
from a heart that had borne and suffered more than mine. But why enlarge upon
this?” (276).

To reframe that question: why not enlarge upon it? For in “The Peasant Marey” he does
just that: “And so when I climbed down from my bunk and looked around, I remember I
suddenly felt I could regard these unfortunates in an entirely different way and that
suddenly, through some sort of miracle, the former hatred and anger in my heart had
vanished” (PM 4). Thus, the question isn’t why the sudden change of heart, but why the
reluctance to report it years earlier, when the anecdote might have jelled, chronologically
at least, with the project at hand? When the inclusion of such a salient anecdote might
have provided a nice balance—softened, perhaps, a rather aloof and unsympathetic
“noble” narrator.

The answer, I suggest, may be located near the end of the vignette, when
Dostoevsky revisits his concept of freedom, this time in the context of an empathic
peasant: “Our encounter was solitary, in an open field, and only God, perhaps, looking
down saw what deep and enlightened human feeling and what delicate, almost feminine
tenderness could fill the heart of a coarse, bestially ignorant Russian serf who at the time
did not expect or even dream of his freedom” (4). When we juxtapose Marey with his
opposite—those “despicable people” (men of “rank”) whom we referenced earlier in this
essay, we can see that the logic of the supplement is at work in both cases: “Officer’s
rank seems to turn their inner selves, and their heads as well, upside down…they display
a servility which is completely unnecessary.” In the case of Marey, it’s the empathy that
he displays “without any ulterior motive” and with “only God, perhaps, looking down”—that would seem unnecessary. But we can see that these needlessnesses “relate to each other according to the structure of supplementarity” in that both cases “are metaphysical determinations—and therefore inherited, arranged with a laborious and interrelating coherence—of supplementary differance” (OG 183). The empathy and humanity of a supposedly “coarse” and “beastial” peasant, the servility and slavishness of a “ranking” officer—these representations are always and already caught up in the play of signification, spreading out into a network of traces, mediations, and ambiguations—so on down the endless chain of signifiers.

Who, then, is freer in Dostoevsky’s oeuvre: the sniveling and obsequious officers, or the “enlightened humans,” the serfs? Perhaps Dostoevsky’s texts are operating according to the same subconscious mechanism that produced the memory of Marey to begin with, the “thing that was often barely perceptible, and then bit by bit […] would grow into a finished picture.” Perhaps the wiser Dostoevsky had begun to sense that the “finished picture” is just that: a picture that is always already unfinished, seeming only to be present by virtue of the absence that makes it possible in the first place; that these opposites (serf/noble, free/unfree) cannot exist in isolation from each other, that we cannot even contemplate the officer’s slavishness without the serf’s benevolence, that these are but links in “an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception” (OG 157). Perhaps that apocryphal quote, the one so often misattributed to Dostoevsky, “The degree of civilization in a
society can be judged by entering its prisons”—is more resonant than we could have imagined, no matter who wrote it.
A missed moment of reckoning. – I driving home at dawn. I’d been partying in West Hollywood all night, so there was no highway involved. The sky was orangey-gray and there was a light mist in the air, but the roads were fine. All I had to do was watch for the lights. As I approached the intersection of Virgil, Beverly, and Temple—about a football field from my house—I zoned out, coasting through the light like Icarus by the sun. In a flash I saw the minivan traveling south off of Virgil. I broadsided it: a thunderous metal to metal crash. My body slammed into a tautened seatbelt. The airbag deployed and deflated without impact. Acrid mist spewed from the console. All this happened in a second or two. Still mobile, I straightened out as best I could. There was thumping, whirring, smoke billowed from the front end. I couldn’t really see. I just recall being determined. So close, just get home.

The cops must’ve been right there, because the siren wailed almost immediately. Bright reds and blues drenched the nightscape. I looked in the rearview. They were right behind me. A spotlight appeared on the driver’s side. There could’ve been no clearer indication that I was being pulled over.

It was the standard duo. Two paunchy cops: the older, balder mentor and the younger, flat-topped protégé. Both assumed that I was intoxicated, and they were correct. I’d had probably eight or nine beers over the course of the night, a buzz tempered by a steady flow of bumps. I submitted to a field sobriety test. The protégé held a pen and instructed me to follow it with my eyes. Then I was told to take nine steps, heel to toe—turn—and go back again. Stand straight, raise a leg, and count out loud. Close your eyes, extend your arms, touch a finger to your nose. Tilt your head back and estimate 30 seconds. All of this I did without error, and now the protégé was unhappy with me. “All
right then,” he said, gripping his gun belt. “You’re going in for vehicular negligence and fleeing the scene of an accident.” He slapped on the cuffs.

I was in the back of the cruiser alone for a good long while. I couldn’t tell what was happening behind me, but surely there were new cops, tow trucks. There was a general sense that no one had been injured; the cops would’ve mentioned that, I figured, if only to make me docile. I hadn’t been patted down, or not thoroughly. I remembered that I still had my blaster on me. I’d finished all the coke but there was residue, and it was paraphernalia nonetheless. Getting it under the front seat would mean one less charge, I figured, so I began sliding my hands, cuffed behind me, to the right, and I got far enough to reach the tiny, anachronistic pocket that held my drugs.16 I pulled the blaster and flung it clumsily. It hit hard plastic, making a bink-ba-bink noise. I scuffed it with a foot, sending it under the front seat for a second before it rolled right back down. I had back-to-back realizations. The first was that the floorboard was sloped, specifically to thwart what I was attempting. The second was that I was an idiot. I’d once witnessed a cop detach the entire backseat with one quick tug (they’re Velcroed in); I knew these cruisers were rigged. Just as I was realizing this, a bright light shone in on me: I hadn’t noticed the mentor and his protégé standing by the window.

Aided by their Maglite torches, the cops inspected the blaster. Clearly there’d been coke inside. (Here’s where being a cokehead actually works to your advantage. There’s no such thing as an almost empty vial; you scrape the last of the last, always.)

“What do you think?” said the protégé, fondling it between his thumb and forefinger.

“Something for the DA,” the mentor replied. Then they left me alone again. I went back

16 You might notice these if you own a pair of Levi’s or Diesel jeans. Originally designed to hold a pocket watch, these tiny things are all but useless nowadays, unless of course you’re a cokehead. Quite handy in that case.
to staring at the bulletproof glass in front of me, glancing occasionally at the sticker in each corner: one warning me not to beat my wife, the other urging me to stop elder abuse.

The cops returned, having reached a new assessment. I was now being booked for possession only. I was baffled by this, but not entirely. I’d been arrested enough times to have become familiar with a certain methodology: cops will often streamline in your favor so as to simplify the paperwork. We headed downtown. This was the Central Division lockup on East Sixth: a monstrosity of gray concrete, metal, and bulletproof glass. Inside was dank and dingy, emblematic of the kind of foot traffic only these places endure. There was early morning noise, chaos, a crowd. The other arrestees all seemed to know each other, which made me feel displaced—a criminal among peers to whom couldn’t relate. I got a sense that the police presence was the only thing keeping me from being preyed upon, so I felt oddly secure. Everyone was restrained, so one wonders how all the graffiti—much of it looking to have been etched with a sharp object—comes about.

We were herded like cattle. In jail, you’re an individual only insofar as your distinctiveness marks you for clear identification. I was fingerprinted and photographed, with special care taken to document my body art. There’d be no mistaking me in the future. I was made to strip naked and lift my dick and balls separately. Then I was instructed to squat and cough. Satisfied that there was nothing lethal or intoxicating up my ass, they told me to dress, sans shoelaces and belt. I was then confined to a holding room where I learned I could make unlimited local calls. I phoned Keith, a friend whom I’d taken on recently as an employee. No answer. I dialed repeatedly, leaving a series of
increasingly desperate messages. (“Keith, I’m gonna kill you,” was the final one, which, since I was in custody, probably wasn’t the smartest thing.)

Eventually I was moved to a larger holding tank somewhere in the bowels of the place: a barrack-style shit pit. Anyone who’s ever been jailed in a major city knows: this is the point where the anxiety of the unknown—the utter sensation of doom—sets in. Without any knowledge of your fate, you’re dumped into a loud dark cell filled with large scary men. If you saw any of them approaching you on an empty street, you’d run the other way. There’s no place to hide, just rows of thinly-padded, mostly occupied, metal bunks. No blankets, no pillows, just bodies. There’s incessant caterwauling, long and low: the coalescing of so many unpleasant voices assaulting your ears the way a garbage dump assaults your nose. Not that the smell was much better. Men pissed and shit openly. I found an empty bunk and claimed it. There were a few tense moments while I waited for someone to object to my being there, but no one did. An attack on me now would be unmotivated and, I assumed, less likely.

I dozed on and off despite the noise. There’s no worse feeling than waking and realizing where you are. I thought of times when I’d dozed on a bus or train, waking disoriented, wondering if I’d missed my destination. How great would it be now just to have a destination? Maybe I’d miss it on purpose. Maybe I wouldn’t go back. Who’d care? I’d be free. If I get out of this, I thought, I’ll never be petty again.

Occasionally inmate names and numbers would bellow over the loudspeaker. No explanation was ever given. Then the call came: Line up for chow! We filed out into a narrow walkway where a mix of deputys and trustees (inmates working off their time) began hollering at us to grab a sack lunch off of what looked like an antiquated pallet
jack. “Keep moving!” they shouted, herding us down another, even narrower, walkway. There was a guy tossing what looked to be cartons of milk. I caught one, thankfully, and looked at it. Cranberry Cocktail Drink.

Back in the cell, I tried not to think. There was a small TV in the upper corner, but it was mounted in a way that made viewing difficult, even if I’d had my glasses. I found a scrap of newspaper, some free rag, but quickly lost interest. What was taking Keith so long? Those were urgent messages: find me, pull the cash, get me out. But then, I understood that he’d be toiling in the process: the bondsman, the cop handling the release forms—the paces of the careless. There were phones in the tank, but unlike the one from earlier, they could only be used to call collect to a landline. That left one option: my mother. She’d then call my brother who, as an LAPD sergeant, might be able to fast-track this whole process, maybe even have it scuttled. The thought was tempting, but then I’d have to explain the drug charge, the accident. It was too much. Better to just wait for Keith.

But what if the cops had been onto me all along? What if I was a “case” they’d been working, waiting for a break? A break I’d just handed them in spades. That’s how you go down: you get sloppy, and how much sloppier could it get than the mess I’d just left on that intersection? How long before they realize that the Mustang that’s been making frequent, clandestine trips to the valley is the same one that’s now mangled at the impound?

When I wasn’t torturing myself with paranoid fantasies, I was doing it with guilt. I thought about my brother, David. I hadn’t been making much of an effort to see the family—holidays, and even then, briefly. During one visit his dog had bitten me. It was
nothing, but it horrified little Jack, with whom I was playing at the time. I suspected that a fang may have pierced me, so I pulled the pant leg of my sweats and a drip of red was trickling down my calf. Jack panicked, stomped his little legs and began to cry. Oh no! Oh no! Oh no! I assured him that I was fine, that it was just a nip, and he calmed down. But his reaction haunted me. When was the last time I’d felt so strongly about another human being?

Ordinarily I was too distracted, too absorbed, to think about it. I made my living committing crimes in the same city where my brother made a living fighting them. If I can get away with it for just a bit longer, I thought, I’ll get out. I swear.

I slept some. Not much, just enough to blur my sense of time. The tank was windowless, so it could’ve been night or day, or the following day. I began to panic. I was seriously considering that call to my mom, just to put something into motion. Fuck the consequences, I thought. I never felt so alone in my life.

Then the call came over the loudspeaker. Though garbled, it was clearly my last name followed by the number on my wristband. My anxiety spiked. Why was I being beckoned now? As I was being buzzed out, I began anticipating possible scenarios. The first was that the cops had discovered my identity, and were preparing to sweat me down. I’d have no choice but to confess. Based on the accident and the blaster and whatever else implicated me, a warrant to search my place, had they not obtained one already, would be a mere formality. I’d be fucked. This, obviously, was the least desirable scenario. The next was that my brother was waiting for me. This possibility, though far more appealing than the first one, still meant trouble. I’d be forced to confess to some of my lifestyle choices, none of them good. There’d be the embarrassment factor, and from there, a game
of quid pro quo. David would have questions, assumptions, protestations—all of which I’d have to meet with answers, denials, defenses. It would be vexing: *What does he actually know? What can I get away with not divulging?*

The final scenario was that Keith had come through. I prayed for this to be the case. If Keith had bailed me out, there’d be nothing but relief from this whole nightmare. There was still the possession beef and the car debacle, but those were nuisance issues: they’d be handled in time and with cash. For now it would be a big hug, a cold beer, a shower, a cigarette. All the reliable distractions.

The hug was even sweeter than I’d imagined: a three-way, since Keith had brought his girlfriend, Danielle. I signed whatever was put in front of me and reclaimed my glasses, wallet, jacket, and cell phone. We pushed though the steel double doors, out into the night. I took a deep breath. “What time is it?” I asked. “Just after eight,” Keith said. I’d been in for fourteen hours. Danielle handed me a Marlboro Light, which I smoked without complaint.

I figured it would be wise to get some legal advice. A friend had recently navigated a DUI, so I got her lawyer’s number. I explained the evidence, the charge. I said that I was open to paying for a consultation, but the attorney didn’t see the need. “It doesn’t sound like they have much of a case,” he said. And then he described a legal term, *de minimis*—Latin for “lacking significance.” In these instances, he said, the charge is likely to be vacated.

On the morning of my arraignment, I put on my old salesman garb and went to the courthouse at 210 W Temple. I waited in line for the metal detector and found the correct room. I encountered a young black lady in a smart-looking pantsuit who claimed
to be “handling” my case. It felt sort of awkward—like being paired up in gym class with someone from another clique. She flipped blithely through the pages of her file; it was clear that she’d just gotten it. I asked if she had any thoughts on the case. “We’ll just wait till they call your name,” she said, “and we’ll go from there.”

The docket was full. The proceedings moved quickly and impersonally, like a line at the deli. My name was called, finally, and I acknowledged my presence. And then the prosecutor, a blonde gentleman, probably younger than me, waved his hand. Papers were shuffled, there were murmurs. The judge cleared her throat and another name was called. I asked my handler what had happened. “They dropped it,” she said. “You’re free to go.” With a powdery vial as evidence, the prosecutor had no interest in pursuing a case: *de minimis.*

Prior to this, I had contacted Geico, my insurance carrier at the time. I was informed, emphatically, that I would not be collecting, which didn’t surprise me in the least. Somewhere in the tone of that exchange, though, I’d detected some speciousness about the whole situation. Without being candid, the insurance agent had alluded to extenuating circumstances involving the other driver. Apparently, he or she was undocumented, had warrants, was driving uninsured, unlicensed, unregistered, intoxicated—some combination of all of these. In any case, the puzzling nature of my arrest was now clear. Compared to the other driver, I actually looked good, and the mentor and his protégé must’ve surmised this. Anything accident-related was bound to result in dismissal, thus the possession charge, weak as it was, afforded the greatest opportunity for a conviction. As far as my blowing a red light, loaded, and t-boning that minivan—everyone, including the other party, was content to just let it all go.
Insurance-wise, my Mustang was a total loss, but not totally beyond repair. State-of-the-art technology, I was told, could realign the frame and that the entire front end could be replaced. It was seven grand all together, so I went to the bank and pulled seven puffy envelopes from the safety deposit box. That plus the bail money and the car rental tallied to just over ten grand, which meant that the whole fiasco set me back about six weeks.
CHAPTER 4
ON TRUTH AND LIES IN NATHAN LEOPOLD

What is a word? The image of a nerve stimulus in sounds. But, to infer from the nerve stimulus a cause outside us: that is already the result of a false and unjustified application of the principle of reason. – Friedrich Nietzsche

I suppose that, as usual, I talked too much. – Nathan Leopold

Nathan Leopold, one half of the infamous duo, Leopold and Loeb, opens his memoir with a bit of a tease. What follows is from the opening page of the first chapter: “If I’m going to tell at all of those horrible events, I must try to recall how they appeared to me then” (23, his emphasis). The point of this clumsily-worded sentence is that he plans not to tell “at all” of said horrible events. At least he addresses this omission head-on. Leopold spends the first three pages, in fact, rationalizing his decision to omit what he presumes to be his readers’ primary interest: the gory details of the crime for which he was convicted. Rarely in memoir do we get such an explicit line-drawing, a disclaimer if you will.17

Omissions and suppressions characterize Leopold’s text, and we’ll address many of them in due time, but for now I’d like to point out something implicit in the quote above: we get a foregrounded (almost fourth-wall-breaking) admission that the textual “I” will be functioning on two ontological levels: the I-now and the I-then. Of course, all autobiographical writing operates this way; we’re always aware of the temporal distance between what I’ll call the narrating and experiencing I, but here we have an early textual clue that the author is going to be, in some way, dissimulating. If I’m going to do this

17 He even goes so far as to say that he “can only apologize and hope that [the reader] can return his book to his bookstore” (25). I’d love to know how many people tried, pointing to this excerpt as a measure of good faith.
right, the way I’m supposed to, I’ll have to access the mentality of that nineteen-year-old murderer.

And wouldn’t that have been something? A series of scenes whereby we gain unvarnished access to the thoughts and actions of a cold-blooded killer; it would have been fabulous. But it was not to be. In effect, Leopold violates one of the cardinal rules of the conversion narrative: full disclosure. He blames his reticence on how these details might affect others close to the events, mixing metaphors in the process: “I simply cannot bring myself to take the chance of splattering any of them with me….To pick the scab from that wound” (25). Fair enough. After all, he and his partner did kidnap a child and bludgeon him to death with a crudely-modified chisel before dumping the half-naked body in a ravine. But how could he keep his promise? That is, with over 375 pages to go, how could he possibly keep all that metaphorical mud to himself? He doesn’t, of course, but as narratologist James Phelan explains, this is the problem with suppressed narration: since the author knows more than the narrator is willing to reveal, the alert reader can account for the gap intratextually: subtle clues and slippages that betray, shall we say, a Nietzschean knowledge.

With Nietzsche’s philosophy as a guide and narrative theory as a lens, we can marry methodology with technique, the undergirding motor with the specific means of conveyance. I argue that Leopold didn’t just invent a new narrative; he methodically employed his Nietzschean cunning to craft a narrative of rehabilitation, a new Leopold that would be palatable both to the public and the parole board. I’ll show that even the digressions—especially the digressions—are employed in service of his redemption story, the one Leopold hoped would rehabilitate his image and free him from prison. He
spent over three decades locked up, finally winning his parole at the age of fifty-two, paunchy and balding, a far cry from the smug nineteen-year-old who brutally co-bludgeoned a minor. He’d accomplished a lot behind bars, and lived out his days quietly thereafter as an X-ray technician in Puerto Rico. He’d done enough time, probably more than necessary, and I believe that his release was just. But was he truthful with his readers? “Truths,” according to Nietzsche, “are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.” Here I hope to shed some light on Leopold’s illusions.

**Suppression and Unreliability in Autobiography**

The use of unreliable narration in autobiography is somewhat controversial, with some critics arguing that the device is simply incompatible with the form. Other theorists, however, have argued otherwise quite convincingly (see Phelan; Dan Shen & Dejin Xu; Ferry). The original definition by Wayne Booth is always instructive: “I have called the narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (159). In the simplest terms, what this means is that we sense a discordance between what the narrator is telling us and what the author believes to be “true”—whether we’re dealing with axis of facts and events or ethics and evaluations. That is, sometimes we get the feeling that what we’re being told is incongruent with what we believe actually occurred, in which case we can locate some other source of factuality; or, what we’re being told is discordant with what we perceive to be a normative value system. Though Booth does describe this distinction and sketch out the parameters roughly (see *Rhetoric of Fiction*, chapter six, “Types of Narration”), we get a much fuller, much more refined explication in James Phelan’s *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric of and Ethics of Character Narration*. Not
only does Phelan argue for the ethics of unreliable narration in nonfiction, he identifies an additional axis: that of knowledge and perception. Thus, we have a total of three axes, each of which corresponds to a particular mode of narration. Phelan explains: “Narrators perform three main roles—reporting, interpreting, and evaluating; sometimes they perform the roles simultaneously….They may, therefore, deviate from the implied author’s views in one or more of these roles simultaneously…[But] in all cases, the authorial audience will recognize a communication from the implied author beyond the awareness of the narrator” (50).

What this means is that the narrator may be revealing, unwittingly, that she is either misreporting (or underreporting) the facts; misinterpreting (or misreading) the motives or particular “stakes” involved in a narrative situation; or mis-evaluating (or mis-regarding) certain ethics or evaluations typically associated (normative) with a particular set of circumstances. Simply put, we can say that a narrator may lie; may be a little “slow on the uptake”; or may be of a questionable moral fiber, and that these are not mutually exclusive. All of this has important implications for the efficacy of unreliability in nonfiction. It’s important to remember that fiction writers didn’t invent this device out of whole cloth; people like this—delusional, deceitful, unscrupulous, or some combination of all three—are commonplace, and some of them even write memoirs. The crucial difference, as Dan Shen and Dejin Xu explain, is that, unlike with fiction, the distance between the author and narrator in autobiography is meant to be concealed: “The difference between the ‘cognizant audience’ in autobiography and the ‘authorial audience’ in fiction is that the former may be totally unsought by, and unwelcome to, the autobiographer, who always wants readers to take the text to be true to his or her
experience” and that “autobiography is more complicated, since unreliability can occur not only at the intratextual level but also at the extratextual [level]” (48, 56).

This, I argue, is precisely the situation we have with Leopold’s Life Plus 99 Years: an author who purposely creates a narrative persona: an untruthful, often naïve, and unscrupulous narrator whose dissimulations and deceits the author hopes to conceal—to keep the audience “incognizant.” Unfortunately for Leopold—who by various accounts was attempting to “gain sympathy for his attempt to gain parole” (Higdon 314)—we have ample access to what I’ll call the “referential plane.” The Leopold and Loeb case was one of the most assiduously-documented crime stories of the early twentieth-century. Leopold, having been incarcerated for thirty years at the time of writing, likely had no idea of just how documented it was; it wasn’t until seventeen years after his death that the motherlode was found in a dusty vault in the Law School at Northwestern University: a treasure-trove of court transcripts, psych evals, police interrogations, confessions, correspondence between the suspects, etc. (Barrett 1). Much of this documentation can be used to debunk, or at least deflate, a number of assertions that Leopold makes along the axis of facts/events, but more interesting from a narratological standpoint is the distance we sometimes detect between the author and the narrator in terms of gullibility. At times Leopold portrays his narrator as more naïve than Leopold should be at the time of writing, and at other times his narrator seems completely unaware that he betrays what Phelan calls a “mistaken value system.” Thus, Leopold’s text shows signs of narrative unreliability along all three axes: facts/events, knowledge/perception, and ethics/evaluation—often simultaneously.
In addition, Leopold’s text shows signs of what Phelan calls “suppressed narration,” a related device whereby the author “omits significant information that the narrative itself otherwise indicates is relevant to the character, situation, or event being reported on, thereby creating either a gap in the text that cannot be filled or a discrepancy between what is reported in one place and not reported in another” (138). We can account for the gap intratextually, “comparing what the narrator conspicuously does not say on that occasion with what the narrator does say on other occasions” (ibid). As Leopold himself admits when commenting on the text of one his critics, “No general reader can possibly know what is true and what is contrived” (Life 370). Since the timeline here coincides with the composition of his own book, could it be that Leopold had found, in a “rival” text, a type of formula for what he himself was hoping to achieve?

**Distance and Suppression: Early Signs**

“Today it seems incredible,” Leopold laments, “that I could have taken part in my everyday activities, could have lived a normal-appearing life, with the dread knowledge of what I had done on my conscience” (28). This is in reference to the days leading up to his arrest, prior to his becoming a suspect. Note the slight sleight of hand here with some shifting around the past perfect tense: we go from present day to what he had done to his having a “conscience.” As the sentence draws to a close (as Leopold subtly closes the gap between the narrating and experiencing I), he manages to smuggle in a conscience that (always already) existed. In case we missed it, he mentions it a few pages later in the context of a police interrogation: “I salved my conscience with the reflection that I knew
whose glasses they were”¹⁸ (32). Two pages later he explains that he’d taken a pay cut on some “birding” classes that he’d instructed (Leopold was, among other things, an experience ornithologist at a young age): “I regarded it as a sort of conscience balm,” he explains, “to make up for the rates I was charging my other classes” (34). Clearly fond of this figure of speech, he uses it once again, this time in the context of keeping a fellow inmate within his comfort zone: “I salved my conscience with the reflection that…Uncle Jim was doing a life sentence, and perhaps fluency in reading wasn’t too important in his case” (105).

The pattern here is obvious enough: not only is it important to Leopold that his readers believe that he has a conscience and always did, but in repeating the image of the “salve” or “balm,” Leopold is deploying what Nietzsche would call a “thoroughly anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be ‘true in itself’ or really and universally valid” (“Truth 4).

Why does it ring false, this “anthropomorphic conscience” that graciously takes a hit every time Leopold dings it for some greater good? Looking at the plane of reference, it seems clear that no one who knew Leopold, no physician who examined him, believed that he had a conscience: “[Leopold] states that he has no feeling of having done anything morally wrong as he doesn’t feel that there is any such thing as morals in the ordinary sense” (Higdon 155). “Nathan…seemed to have adopted a cynical, callous attitude toward the killing, as though it were morally inconsequential” (Baatz 147). Or even in his own words at the time, “‘I can’t understand,’ Nathan complained, talking to no one in particular, ‘why the papers say this is such an atrocious murder’” (ibid 142). Curious,

¹⁸ For fuller context, he’d clumsily left his glasses at the crime scene, implicating himself, thus he wants us to believe that he could live with telling the cops that he “knew whose glasses they were” without technically lying—an explanation that will seem even more absurd as we proceed.
then, that Leopold’s narrator undermines his own anthropomorphism, and quite clearly, almost immediately after introducing it: “Looking back from the vantage point of today, I cannot understand how my mind worked then. For I can recall no feeling then of remorse…I had no social consciousness then” (33). And a bit later, “Where was my conscience? Where were my moral inhibitions? Had they not developed?” (50).

This incongruence likely has to do with Leopold’s knowledge concerning the information that was already in the public sphere: his image. Thus, his mitigative efforts appear to be in service of an equation that seems reasonable: an inchoate, remorseless conscience plus time equals a fully functioning one. But still, the mentioning of the conscience prior to the admission of remorselessness bears the hallmark of suppressed narration, “comparing what the narrator conspicuously does not say on one occasion with what the narrator does say on other occasions.”

We might have a better example of suppressed narration with regards to Leopold’s sexuality—introduced early on, again, as a seemingly salient plot point:

[I was] seeing as much as I possibly could of Connie. Now there was a girl! Like none I’d ever met before. I was head over heels in love. Puppy love, if you like, but somehow it doesn’t seem like puppy love when you’re a puppy. All I knew was that she had more—much more—of all the desirable qualities than any other girl I’d seen, and far more intelligent—she was graduating from the university in June. (30)

Incidentally, Nietzsche does draw a distinction between “Homeric shame” and guilt, the idea being that Oedipus gouges out his eyes due to the “rankness of [his] own shame,” but that it was only with the rise of Christianity that bad conscience—and hence full-blown guilt—burrowed into the human psyche. Leopold, on the other hand, makes no attempt to distinguish his supposed conscience from his admitted remorselessness, let alone address the incongruity.
The timing here coincides with the “everyday activities” mentioned at the opening of this section: the ones that the narrating-I now recalls as oddly “normal-appearing” considering that only days earlier he’d committed an atrocious murder. “Connie” is a pseudonym for Susan Lurie with whom Leopold maintained, by all accounts including hers, a platonic friendship (Higdon 67, 72; Baatz 75). As with the conscience issue, Leopold’s presumed heterosexuality seems important to his narrative—but again, no one who knew him, no analyst who observed him, believed this to be the case (Baatz 43, 47, 117). That Leopold and Loeb were lovers is established fact (there were letters found, admissions made), and the “alienists” who’d examined Leopold after his arrest had “determined that he never had been attracted to the opposite sex and looked on women as inferior intellectually” (Higdon 201).

That an author would want to suppress his homosexuality in the late 1950s is perfectly understandable, but Leopold had an even stronger motivation. Loeb’s eventual murder at the hands of another inmate, James Day, would result in an acquittal, despite the fact that Day freely admitted to shanking Loeb in the showers at Stateville. “Nobody likes a queer, a homo, or a lesbian,” a juror would admit to a reporter after the verdict (Higdon 301). Unsurprisingly, there’s no mention of homosexuality anywhere in Leopold’s memoir, though its connection to motive looms over the text like an albatross: “My motive, so far as I can be said to have had one, was to please [Loeb]” (49). “His friendship was necessary to me—terribly necessary” (50). As always, Leopold’s biographers were more to the point: “Nathan was Richard’s obsequious companion, eager to do anything the other boy desired” (Baatz 260). As with all suppressed narration, the clues are to be found elsewhere in the text. In the context of getting their alibis straight
after the crime, Leopold had this to say: “Of course our subconscious desires determined our respective interpretations in advance: each of us chose that interpretation which most nearly accorded with what he had wanted in the first place” (40). After one particularly bizarre (and long) list of accolades he showers on his pal, Leopold writes: “Some people who have my welfare at heart tell me that I should not write as I do of [Loeb], that it hurts me, that I’m still influenced by what was amoral and mad in his character” (270).20 As Leopold’s wife would remark years later, in response to a reporter’s question about a photo of Loeb prominently displayed in the bedroom of the couple’s home in Puerto Rico, “Nathan after all is complex” (Andrews 3).

Now the single biggest mystery surrounding the whole sordid ordeal is the question of who, Leopold or Loeb, committed the murder, the actual bludgeoning of the victim, Bobby Franks. Their confessions were otherwise identical: the extensive preplanning, the selection and abduction of the victim, their bungled attempt at concealing the body, etc. But one of them had to be driving while the other wielded the chisel, and they both blamed the other. The matter made no legal difference: same lawyer, same guilty plea, same sentence. But Leopold devises a way to make them both seem, in a twisted sort of way, like rational—almost sympathetic—actors: “Now I pleaded with him to retract his story, to tell the truth. I pointed out that that who struck the blow made no difference in our degree of guilt. To this fact he agreed” (57). Loeb’s rationalization was that it was better to let both families think that the other was to blame: “I know Mompsie feels less terrible than she might, thinking you did it. I’m not going to

20 At the beginning of the book, Leopold makes it clear that his editors at Doubleday weren’t happy with the galleys: “They feel that from the book, as it stands, much is missing” (24). This becomes a running theme, and one suspects that, when it comes to Loeb, his “influence” over Leopold might have been concerning, but not quite in the way Leopold is depicting it here.
take that shred of comfort away from her” (ibid). Leopold acquiesces, but then he deploys what might be the most telling, certainly the most ironic, line in the whole book: “Truth, I felt, must have some value” (ibid). The weightiness of this statement goes far beyond any “conventional” meaning associated with the words themselves, but before we unpack, we must address the single biggest omission from Leopold’s memoir: his lifelong admiration of Friedrich Nietzsche.

The Leopold-Nietzsche Connection

The question of motive often haunts these “crime of the century” cases. There’s always a clamoring for explanations, associations, symbols, some more curious than others. Charles Manson and Denis Wilson. Timothy McVeigh and The Turner Diaries. David Berkowitz and his barking dog. Nathan Leopold and Friedrich Nietzsche. Any piece of writing longer than a blurb having to do with the killing of Bobby Franks will cite Nietzsche’s philosophy as having been, if not the primary motive, then at least an undergirding factor, an inspiration (Higdon 20; Baatz 52). Throughout the literature, psych evals, courtroom transcripts, etc., we see how neatly Nietzsche—or more accurately his caricature—matches Leopold’s personal philosophy: “Leopold attempted to justify the murder itself on the basis of Nietzsche’s philosophy (Higdon 218). “Nathan was one of the brightest students in his class—a little eccentric, certainly, with his Nietzschean philosophy” (Baatz 106).

The absence of Nietzsche’s name from Leopold’s book isn’t surprising; clearly the author intended to distance his narrator from anything having to with his former philosophy. Though it’s understandable why he’d downplay his individualism, there’s
evidence to suggest that Leopold never disavowed his Nietzscheanism. As Phelan points out, these ghosts have a tendency to haunt the text. I’ll have more to say on his use of digressions in another section, but for now take this curious one on the “faculty of forgetting”:

The difficulty is that the human mind is apparently so constituted as not to carry long the affective, emotional memory of unpleasant experiences. That’s fortunate, I guess, for if we didn’t have the faculty of forgetting, if the disagreeable emotions connected with painful experiences stayed vivid in our memories, we’d all be so burdened with pain-producing memories that we wouldn’t want to go on living. (156)

This little aside should be enough to raise the antennae of anyone familiar with Nietzsche’s work, for he wrote extensively on the subject of memory and the benefits of forgetting in particular: “[T]his is the utility as I have said, of the active forgetfulness, which is a very sentinel and nurse of psychic order, repose, etiquette; and this shows at once why it is that there can be no happiness, no gladness, no hope, no pride, no real present, without forgetfulness” (EN 233). “How little moral the world would appear without forgetfulness!” Nietzsche declares in *Human, All Too Human*, “A poet could say that God had placed forgetfulness as a doorkeeper on the threshold of the temple of human dignity” (49). For someone who clearly wished to disassociate himself with Nietzsche, Leopold could have been a bit more careful.

The popular link between Leopold and Nietzsche (the one that journalists and biographers cite ad nauseum) involves the Übermensch, or superman, the one “who stood

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21 Inmate pal Gene Lovitz, for instance, claims to have argued with Leopold about the philosopher. “Nietzsche never gave an answer to anything in his life,” Lovitz claims to have said, to which Leopold is said to have responded, “Nietzsche’s questions were the answers, smart alec!” (Higdon 306).
above the law, above morality, someone whose actions were uninhibited by conventional behavior” (Baatz, 259). But this connection oversimplifies both Nietzsche’s conception and Leopold’s interpretation. Nietzsche was prolific and a fan like Leopold certainly read beyond his one and only novel, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, wherein the superman is unveiled and explicated. I suggest, however, that the key to decoding Leopold’s memoir can be found in an essay Nietzsche wrote early in his career but was only published posthumously: “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense.”

Sprawling and dense, “On Truth” foreshadows key themes that Nietzsche would explore over the course of his career: truth, dissimulation, the intellect, language. His central thesis should sound familiar to anyone acquainted with postmodernism:

> What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (3)

Divorced from its context, this excerpt lends itself easily to accusations of relativism. But Nietzsche’s basic point is that the human intellect developed, not as an instrument for obtaining knowledge, but as a survival technique, “an aid to the most unfortunate, most delicate, most evanescent beings in order to hold them for a minute in existence” (ibid 1). Without our intellectual capacity, we’d be helpless in the wild: wimpy hands and feet, teeth that are weak and unsharp. We live by our wits, our cunning, and as any politician
or salesman knows, the artfully spoken “truth” can mean the difference between keeping or losing one’s livelihood, achieving and maintaining what we call “freedom,” and so forth. In short, Nietzsche’s “truth” has less to do with factual knowledge and more to do with the conventions of language, our capacity for reducing individualized entities into concepts: “If I make up the definition of a mammal, and then, after inspecting a camel, declare, ‘Look, a mammal,’ I have indeed brought truth to light in this way, but it is a truth of limited value” (4, my emphasis). In this sense, truth becomes a tautology; we create the conventions by which words are used and then we assign terminology to fit those conventions.

With this in mind, we’re ready to return to Leopold’s line, “Truth, I felt, must have some value.” Once again, we have the distancing of the narrating and experiencing I; the narrator is telling us how the character “felt.” That he had vehemently denied participating in the crime only days earlier is one thing. That we’re given no indication that Leopold still feels this way is another, but both are less important than the sentiment itself as a moral precept. Naysayers claim that Nietzsche’s take on the truth amounts to an “anything goes” mentality whereby anyone’s truth is as valid as any other, but again, that’s a misreading. The point is that people often use the conventions of language, in effect mimicking the motions of truth telling, to arrive at a desired result—which, in the absence of reliable referential data, we’re likely to believe by default. And this is precisely what Leopold is banking on: that people will believe his truth over what he suspects has been sedimented in the popular mind. No easy task. We agree with Simon Baatz, author of For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder that Shocked Chicago, when he says that Leopold was “careless with the truth” and that he “wrote his
autobiography as part of his campaign to win parole” (465). But that’s as far as Baatz and other biographers go; the motivation for writing is much clearer than the motivation for Leopold’s crime, but at this point we’re in a much better position to explain both the philosophy behind the dissimulation as well as the specific devices employed.

Unreliable Narration

One notable example of unreliability occurs in reference to an infamous quote, widely published at the time. It’s worth transcribing Leopold’s version of events in full context:

There were two or three [reporters] in the car with me. They were kind and courteous; they encouraged me to talk. Here was my chance, they said, to get my side of the story before the world. I didn’t feel like talking. I tried to be civil, but I made it apparent that I didn’t want to say anything. They were persistent—oh, how persistent! Finally, they goaded me into an outburst. Remember, please, that I was nineteen—that I was green as grass. Remember, please, that I hadn’t had six hours’ sleep in three days. Remember, too, that I had just been through the most trying ordeal of my life.

What I said was, ‘I suppose you can justify this as easily as an entomologist can justify sticking a bug on a pin. Or a bacteriologist putting a microbe on a microscope.’

What I meant was, of course, that no doubt they, the reporters, could ease their consciences for the prying, probing, questioning of me they were doing on the grounds of scientific curiosity….I was being sarcastic. I was telling them that they were showing me, a human being—and a human being in a tough spot—no more consideration than a scientist showed an insect or a microbe. (48-9)
There’s much to unpack here, beginning with the “goaded” claim. Leopold was known to be a blabbermouth with both the press and the police. “Leopold seemed proud of his crime, telling a Tribune reporter, ‘Why we even rehearsed the kidnapping, carrying it through in all details, lacking only the boy we were to kidnap and kill’” (Higdon 126). “Nathan was laughing and joking, bantering with the police escort….One would have thought Nathan had not a care in the world” (Baatz 145). Others, in fact, would describe the runup to these same events quite differently: “It was not long before both prisoners were gossiping…” (Baatz, 147). All the pleading for the reader to “remember” that he was young, sleep deprived, and supposedly anxious, hardly serves his argument. But it’s the dialogue itself, specifically Leopold’s depiction of it, that interests us here. Here’s the precise quote as reported at the time, the one that appears in every subsequent piece of writing: “It was just an experiment. It is as easy for us to justify as an entomologist in impaling a beetle on a pin” (Higdon 146).

Comparing the two quotes, Leopold’s with the official version, we can see what he’s trying to do: adding a few words (“I suppose you”), moving a few others. But the bigger absurdity here is that his recontextualization implies that our sympathies should be with him. We’re supposed to “remember” that he’s the victim here, he’s the one in a “tough spot,” being harangued. On one level, he’s suppressing his character’s well-documented enthusiasm for press attention: “I suppose that, as usual, I talked too much” (74). On another level, he’s clearly playing fast and loose with the facts, as documented. Lastly, he’s twisting the context in such a way as to garner sympathy for himself when all the evidence supports this being yet another characteristic statement—a personality prone

22 I find it odd that his editor at Doubleday was not firmer in terms of cuts here: the pleading, if not the lying. Also, the absurd suggestion the reporters would need their consciences assuaged reminds one of Joan Didion’s famous quote, “Writers are always selling someone out.”
to “braggadocio, with its exaggerated self-regard and its casual dismissal of others” (Baatz 52). Thus, we have unreliability along the axes of facts/events and ethics/evaluation: a misreport combined with a mis-regard, what Phelan would call evidence of a “misplaced value system”—an effort to “preserve himself against other individuals, in a natural state of affairs he employs the intellect mostly for simulation alone” (“Truth” 2). For the word “truth” in Leopold’s statement—that it “must have some value”—we might substitute the word “perception.”

Similar examples occur throughout the early chapters of the memoir, all in service of mitigating (or attempting to mitigate) his role in the crime. Here Leopold has his work cut out for him: “Nathan had encouraged the public perception that he was a precocious intellectual….Yet he had failed to foresee that his claim to be a genius would, in the public mind at least, confer on him the role of mastermind in the murder of Bobby Franks” (Baatz, 255). The prosecution’s theory that the murder was simply the logical conclusion of a sex crime gone bad, for instance, Leopold simply rejects out of hand.23 His assertion that there “wasn’t a scintilla of evidence in all the hundreds of thousands of words of testimony to support such a charge” (77)—simply isn’t true. According to his confession, “Leopold at one point proposed that they kidnap a girl and rape her the way he had imagined German soldiers attacked defenseless French girls” (Higdon 96). “[O]ne motive,” introduced in court, “was Nathan’s desire to rape a child. Why had the killers removed Bobby’s trousers three hours before disposing of the body in the culvert by the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks?” (Baatz 380). Since both confessions made to police and

23 Despite skipping the trial phase, the sentencing phase was so long, with both sides arguing so vehemently (and theatrically) that it resembled more of a litigation of events, persons, and motives. Clarence Darrow, the defendants’ famous attorney, had essentially put the death penalty on trial.
expert testimony on the witness stand count as “evidence” in a court of law, we have, at
the very least, unreliability on the axis of facts/events.

Leopold’s persistent accolading of Loeb is more than a little bizarre. He describes
his partner in crime as possessing “more of the truly fine qualities than almost anyone
else I have ever known” (269). He goes so far as to describe himself as “bedazzled” with
his pal while (unsuccessfully) suppressing what is obvious to everyone else: that he was
completely and utterly in love (Baatz, 43, 52; Higdon, 288, 335). His undying love for
Loeb is probably best illustrated by his relentless campaign to broker a transfer so that
they could serve time together. The depiction of his encounter with the warden is worth
transcribing in detail. We begin with a line from Warden Hill:

“You know that Loeb is at Stateville now. And you know it has been the
policy of the institution to keep you two separated….”

Here it was; this is what I had been waiting for. And I might as well meet it
head on here and now. I didn’t have a thing to lose. Suppose I did get him good
and mad; I wouldn’t be around long enough to face the consequences. Real
desperation has some real advantages.

“Well, Warden,” I said, “I know that has been the policy dictated by the
Chicago newspapers. I know that your predecessors didn’t dare buck that policy.
But somehow I had the impression that you were running the prison now and not
the newspapers.”

The warden’s face and neck got a little red; for a long minute he didn’t say
anything. Then he pounded the desk with his fist, turned to Deputy Erickson, who
was seated behind me, and shouted: “By God, Erickson, he’s right. If we can’t run
a prison with these two boys under one roof, you and I had better get ourselves
other jobs.” (187)

Narratively speaking, this represents a very short duration (notwithstanding Leopold’s
claim that the warden was silent for a “long minute”) for a warden, a despot by vocation,
to do a complete about-face.24 But the problem, as anyone who’s ever served time in a
correctional institution would know (myself included) is that the scene as depicted—this
matching of wits—rings false. There’s simply no way that a warden is going to (willfully,
genuinely) correct himself so deferentially to a prisoner, especially in front of a
subordinate. No way.

Unless of course he sees something in it for himself. Considering that this was
Chicago in the late 1920s, should it register as surprising that a prison warden might be
cagey and opportunistic? Have political aspirations? That he might want to manipulate
his inmates for his own ends? James Jacobs, author of Stateville: The Penitentiary in
Mass Society, describes Hill’s tenure as a “feudal system”: “Aside from the wardens and
guards, there were few other employees at Stateville….The only way such an immense
institution could function was for inmates to fill clerical positions throughout the prison.
This gave certain inmates powerful leverage to bargain (explicitly and implicitly) for
privileges” (22). Thus, it isn’t Leopold’s depiction of events that we find dubious, and by
all accounts he was able to parlay his peculiar talents into a position of privilege. “Yet,
the passage is reliable as far as it goes; the problem is that it doesn’t go far enough”
(Phelan 34, his emphasis). The distance between the author and the narrator in this
instance registers as a “misreading.” Even if Leopold’s narrator is gullible enough to

24 Part of me suspects that this might be a composite scene. Perhaps there were several meetings over
time, the essence of which Leopold has simply condensed for narrative effect. In any event, “the
important question is what we can infer about the implied author’s relation to the narration” (Phelan 53).
believe that his appeal to the warden’s vanity had clinched the deal, it’s harder to believe that the implied author—with roughly twenty additional years of prison time under his belt—is just as naïve. This would imply unreliability along the axis of knowledge and perception.

Yet, for narrative reasons, it makes sense that Leopold would frame it this way. The scene serves as a turning point or “inciting incident” leading to the protagonist’s raison d’être. Hereafter, Leopold becomes the “model prisoner,” serving at the pleasure of a succession of wardens. Reunited with Loeb, the two become workhorses for the prison administration, the likes of which no correctional institution had ever seen. Together they start the Stateville Correspondence School (servicing both Joliet and Stateville) whereby interested inmates could resume (or begin) their high school educations, with Leopold estimating that “almost twice as many non-students, proportionately, violated their paroles” (234). “The school,” Leopold explains, “had developed into something of a show place” and the warden “got into the habit of showing it to most of the distinguished visitors to the prison” (236). Thus, we can’t help but suspect that the warden, far from being out-witted by a cagey inmate, had fairly clear ulterior motives. With two boy geniuses under his yoke25, it behooves him, not only to pool their talents, but to make it seem as though he were doing them a favor. And we doubt that Leopold, as author, hadn’t put all this together. Keeping his narrator naïve provides the motive necessary for the character’s arc: an account which “cannot be trusted entirely. Leopold wrote the book at a time when he hoped to obtain parole and included little which reflected unfavorably on him” (Higdon 284).

25 It was common knowledge that Leopold and Loeb had IQs well above average, had breezed through college early, and were quite fond of each other. Clearly the warden saw an angle; there’s simply no “altruistic” incentive for a warden to acquiesce to an inmate’s argument.
It comes as no surprise that Leopold “felt that a retelling of the crime would have a negative effect on his parole situation” (Higdon 315). But with the crime narrative (his revisionism of it) behind him, Leopold can now focus mainly on his jailhouse conversion. If he had his work cut out for him before, this narrative shift would require a Herculean effort, for the popular (that is to say, largely factual) narrative was out there, and it wasn’t pretty. During one of his in-custody interviews Leopold had confessed that he had “no moral beliefs and religion meant nothing to him: he was an atheist. Whatever served an individual’s purpose—that was the best guide to conduct” (Baatz 148). Clearly, he had some cleaning up to do.

At the opening of *Life Plus 99 Years*, Leopold says that he’d “changed many a word and many a passage in the text” (24). Standard enough. But an interesting clue appears again near the end, when Leopold is describing his reaction to the publication of *Compulsion*, Meyer Levin’s bestselling novel inspired by the crime. While expressing dismay at the unflattering depiction, Leopold can’t help but confess his admiration for Levin’s “consummate artistry”: “He has taken a large amount of fact, and to it he has added an even larger amount of fiction—of pure balderdash. And he has done it in such superbly artistic fashion that the seams don’t show” (370). The laudatory nature of the critique implies that, to Leopold, there’s more at work than mere spin. His reading reflects what Nietzsche would describe as “linguistic legislation”: “a regularly valid and obligatory designation of things” (“Truth” 2). Simply put, Leopold was determined, this time, to say the correct things: the socially acceptable, the “obligatory.” Incidentally, the chronology of this reading—Leopold’s obtainment of Meyer’s book and critique thereof—coincides roughly with the drafting of *Life Plus 99 years*. 
Analyzing the Digressions

Essentially, Leopold’s plan of attack is twofold: 1) recast his role in the crime as someone who was “carried along” on an escapade for which he “had no enthusiasm” but rather “a feeling of deep repugnance” (49), and 2) convince the reader that he has experienced a spiritual awakening while behind bars, finding God and abandoning his Nietzschean atheism. The question of Leopold’s burgeoning morality: here the unreliable narration takes on a much more dynamic sheen, a naïve narrator channeling Nietzsche, using only “the valid designations, the words, to make the unreal appear as real” (“Truth” 2).

The latter half of Leopold’s text is devoted mainly to his achievements while in prison, the motives for which “may not have been entirely altruistic” (Higdon 290). There was the aforementioned school and his work with the Sociological Research Office. He apprenticed and eventually became a certified X-ray technician. In the early 1940s he volunteered for the Stateville Penitentiary Malaria Study, became infected and nearly died, he claims, all for the war effort (293-325). Many of these claims are to some degree specious, and his motives as well as his actions have been questioned by both prison staff and inmates. The many pages that Leopold devotes to documenting the success of the school are more or less undercut by his own admission that the instructors were routinely “bought” and prone to issuing “phony course completions” (283). His involvement with the sociologist was allegedly predicated on the researcher supplying “tailor-made cigarettes on the sly” (Jacobs 18). His proud declaration that the “cure for malaria had been discovered!” (325)—we know this to be an overstatement.26 Leopold, of course,

26 The legacy of the Stateville Malaria Study frames it as more of an exercise in public relations. The ethics were questionable at best and the results were greatly exaggerated. As for the medical research Leopold conducted, it has been alleged that he “interfered with the smooth running of the research program by engaging the prisoner guinea pigs in homosexual acts” (Higdon 308).
neglects to mention that it seemed apparent to his fellow inmates that “he and Loeb had established the prison school for the opportunity it afforded them of getting together, that Leopold’s much-publicized participation in the malaria project had been no more than that of hundreds of other convict volunteers” (Higdon 307). Even if we grant him that the facts and events surrounding his accomplishments are more or less accurate, it would seem that he’s both exaggerating his involvement and misrepresenting his motives—a mis-regard along the axis of ethics and evaluation.

But what we find more interesting than all these questionable achievements are the moments when Leopold himself disappears altogether; there are long passages that wouldn’t seem out of place in a religious tome or a medical text. Here’s a sample:

Adam and Eve sinned and were driven from the Garden of Eden for their sin. But they did not spend the remainder of their lives in idle grief and sorrow over their sin. No; God commanded them to labor for their daily bread in the sweat of their brow—to work for the welfare of others, their children, as well as for themselves. And King David sinned when he sent Uriah to his death at the hands of the Ammonites and took his wife. (240)

It was known that the sporozoites, the stage of the parasite found in the mosquito, are injected into the human with the bite of the mosquito. But they leave the original port of entry almost at once, as we had shown. Presumably they travel by means of the capillaries or the lymphatic system and hole up in the body. But where? For eight or nine days after infection there is no way of determining medically if a patient has malaria. (323)
Both of these go on, and both are representative of the later chapters. What Leopold seems to have realized, so late in life, is that he’d been misusing the “conventions” of language to his detriment. Baatz points out that he had always “projected a disdainful, supercilious, arrogant attitude” (41-2). Though “gifted scholastically, [he] was considered arrogant and conceited” (Higdon 18). Leopold himself even acknowledges, however tepidly, that he “often offend[s] people without in any way intending to” and though he’d tried to be affable, he “just [doesn’t] seem to have what it takes” (284, 243). Later, as the temporal gap between the narrating and experiencing I approaches what Gérard Genette calls “final convergence,” Leopold essentially shows his hand: “My habit of showing my feelings openly and without attempt at dissimulation made me disliked by many fellows” (284, my emphasis).

Hence the stakes involved in penning his memoir, the crucialness of the dissimulation. Since his mouth had gotten him into so much trouble in the past, Leopold seems now to be using his writing as “a restoration, by a certain absence and by a sort of calculated effacement, of presence disappointed of itself in speech” (Derrida, *OG* 142). Indeed, he’d experienced this disappointment repeatedly, bungling his earlier attempts at parole: “Nathan had intended to make a good impression, but to his listeners sitting across the table, his answers seemed too trite and too quick. There was still something about Nathan’s manner reminiscent of the arrogance of his youth. His remarks seemed almost offhand. He was not sufficiently contrite” (Baatz 438).

What he needed now, desperately, was to get as close as possible, linguistically, to a socially acceptable—almost objective—truth. Something Nietzsche has to say on the matter seems salient:
It is this way with all of us concerning language; we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors….Thus the genesis of language does not proceed logically in any case, and all the material within and with which the man of truth, the scientist, the philosopher later work and build, from never-never land, is at least not derived from the essence of things. (“Truth” 3)

“Truth” according to Nietzsche, isn’t necessarily false, but it’s certainly contingent within certain historical schemata: religion, science, rationality, etc. This explains Leopold’s tedious sermonizing about Adam and Eve and sporozoites—the curious (and discordant) digressions on both “truths.” Leopold is simply hedging his bets: surely everyone on the parole board in 1957 is either a man of science or a man of God. Whether or not Leopold believes in either is irrelevant. He need not believe in “trees, colors, snow” or that his metaphors are in any way “essential.” It matters only that his words (conceptions) achieve, as closely as possible, the maximum amount of “truth” for the maximum number of readers. Thus, he’s using Nietzsche’s philosophy in a very subversive way, not espousing his genealogical investigation into truth, but employing the sleights of hand that Nietzsche demystifies. “Only through forgetfulness,” Nietzsche argues, “can man ever achieve the illusion of possessing a ‘truth’” (“Truth” 2). Leopold is banking on his readers reevaluating all the horrible things they’ve ever read or heard about him. He uses science and religion as metaphors: taken separately, one or the other

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27 For the “philosopher” in Nietzsche’s example we can safely substitute the theologian. He’s talking about purveyors of “truth” who we traditionally look to for an objective accounting of “things-in-themselves.”
is bound to stand in for one or another’s “truth.” Taken together, they stand in for Leopold’s complete rehabilitation.
The wall. – Paisley plopped on my couch, making one of her *hmmph* noises—a poutiness I matched with characteristic languor. The urge to accommodate each other’s quirks having long since dissipated, this was our routine. Like an old couple, we just were.

“I broke up with Volkert today,” she said.

“Again?”

“Uh huh. I need a gram and something to help me sleep.”

Paisley rifled through her Louis Vuitton knockoff, a freshly-lit one hundred dangling from her lips. She did this habitually: rather than remove the cigarette when busy, she’d just squint fish-lipped into a trail of smoke. She had crow’s feet at twenty-eight. There were post-it notes, tampons, receipts, a traffic ticket, antihistamine, birth control—all on my couch now. Half a roll of Tums rolled onto the floor. She finally found some scraggly bills and began organizing them. Clearly, she was short. “Just give me twenty-five,” I said. “That’s cost. And I’ll throw in a Xanax bar for free.” She looked at me like I’d just wiped away every problem she’d ever have.

She began rolling up a five-dollar bill. “Don’t use that,” I said, “you’ll wind up with Hep C.” I got her a clean straw and settled down beside her. I must have sighed because she asked if I was okay.

“Why, don’t I seem okay?”

“You just seem kind of bothered by something.”

“Do I?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t assume. I don’t really know you.”
This was Paisley. She was the type to let things slip through the filter, no matter how awkward or confounding. “What do you mean you don’t know me?” I said, “We’ve been on this couch together for years.”

She dropped her little straw and sniffled. “You never share anything. You’re a nice guy and everything, Jimmy, but you’re unreadable. You’re like this walled-off person, and I’m not the only one who thinks so.”

I tried to think of people I knew who knew Paisley. They were many. How often had this “wall” of mine been discussed? “What do you think, Paisley? You think that any of this”—I waved a hand through the air—“means anything? Your stars, your quasars, your Zodiac dating bullshit, you really think the universe has a plan? Well, it doesn’t. Grow up.” I reached for my Parliaments on the table. “Stop trying to make sense of the chaos.” By the time I lit a smoke and leaned back, I could see that Paisley was crying.

“Aw Jesus, Paisley, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to come down on you like that.”

She wiped her tears. “No, it’s okay,” she said. “You’re right. I need to toughen up.”

“No, you don’t. You’d be acting tough and that would come across all wrong and you’d be just another phony. And everyone would know, they just wouldn’t say anything because they’re all phonies too.”

We smoked silently for a moment. Then she asked if I’d ever been to therapy. I said no.

“Ever consider it?”

“What would I say to a shrink, Paisley? That I’m feeling unfulfilled as a drug dealer? That I’m experiencing cognitive dissonance?”
“Is that like a male confidence thing?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“Well, if you decide to go, you can tell your therapist anything, you know. They can’t call the cops unless you threaten them or something. It’s against their code or whatever.”

“That’s comforting.”

She went back to her lines. Amidst the purse scatterings on the couch there was a photo, so I reached for it out of curiosity. It was of Paisley and a woman whom I didn’t recognize. They were wearing funny hats and mugging for the camera. Paisley looked very pretty. Not like she did this day, on my couch.28

28 A short time later, Paisley moved to San Francisco to be with her family. She wanted to start fresh, she said, get clean. Whether she did or not I can’t say. I don’t recall anyone mentioning her after she left. That’s how it is: you leave LA and no one misses a beat. Time is homogenous, empty: it’s like you were never there.
ESCAPE FROM THE TOWER: THE REVOLUTIONARIES

Arrested, convicted, tortured, and amnestied, they use their period of detention to compare ideas and harden their determination. – Frantz Fanon

On a literal level, we take “decolonization” to mean the process of indigenous people ridding themselves of colonial rule and oppression: the weeding out of “Western” biases as well as the reclaiming of land and the reestablishing of “native” cultures and practices. In his texts, Frantz Fanon takes us through the process of decolonization: the stages of both social and psychological evolution leading ultimately to national and individual independence. The literal reappropriation of land and resources on the infrastructural level entails a strategic, protracted ground campaign involving violence and guerilla warfare; but decolonization also requires an essential psychological component—the deconstruction of colonial ideologies and the exorcising of what some have called the “colonized mind”: “the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world….To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (Ngũgĩ 16).

Decolonization, then, is a comprehensive rebirth of sorts involving the successful completion of certain stages or sites of struggle. A reading of Fanon’s texts in particular reveals the undergoing of three distinct yet overlapping phases: 1) the “native” or “colonized” phase, characterized by an arrested psychological development or false consciousness during which “violence turns inward, bottles itself up deep inside us, and
seeks an outlet” (*Wretched* 1xi); 2) the “semiconscious” or “interregnum” phase, whereby
the catharsis begins, but the outlet(s) are insufficient or misdirected: “one’s conception of
the world is not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic” (Gramsci 324); 3) the
“disalienated” or “decolonized” phase, characterized by renewed focus and sense of
belonging: “the transition from ‘this must be’ to ‘this is how I should like things to be,’
and even more so, perhaps, the sublimation of the individual in a henceforth universal
good” (Camus 15).

Since their publication, texts by the likes of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o have been studied and cited by black prisoners as guidebooks
through the process of mental decolonization: the reappropriation of those “tools” as a
means of reconstructing one’s sense of self, consciousness of historical and structural
inequities, and a fuller understanding of factors contributing to their incarceration—in
short, “Decolonization is truly the creation of new men” (*Wretched* 2). We want to argue
that the aforementioned phases can traced through the prison narratives of black
revolutionaries, and that this process has been similarly analyzed by other theorists in
other contexts as a general “deprogramming” or coming to consciousness. For instance,
Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is like Fanon’s colonization in that they both
represent relational, dialectical forces that involve the masses participating unconsciously
in their own oppression: a balance between consent and coercion. In the penitentiary,
coercion is a bit closer to domination, but the basic structure remains: “[S]tate coercive
power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups who do not ‘consent’ either
actively or passively” (Gramsci 12). Similarly, Albert Camus unpacks for us the
awakening of the “man in revolt,” or the rebel who “begins by demanding justice and
ends by wanting to wear a crown” (25)—which of course bears a striking similarity to Fanon’s colonized subject who “is determined to fight more than the colonist. In fact, he has already decided to take his place” (Wretched 9).

A separate but interrelated idea is that of “alienation” as described by Jean-Paul Sartre and other philosophers as a “lack” at the core of one’s being. Alienation for Fanon is, for the black subject, an amalgam of socio-economic, historico-political, and philosophical situationism. As Siphiwe Ndlovu, author of The Concept of Alienation in the Work of Frantz Fanon, puts it, “[A]lienation would be ‘felt’ doubly…he or she will suffer alienation from the self and, secondly, he/she was alienated from the environment of the social milieu” (56). Thus, for the prisoner, it’s a triple threat: self-alienation, social alienation, and legal alienation. The white man who, Fanon argues, has “no scruples about imprisoning” someone like him, has even less when it comes to blacks already caught up in the penal system. Such subjects live in a zone beyond the “zone of nonbeing.” The original subject already subsists in a state of “colonial despair”—a “suffocating reification” with ramifications that are both internal and external; the black subject is forever trying to reintegrate “the fragments put together by another me” (BSWM 89). This subject is a construction—a cobbling together of myths and stereotypes woven “out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (ibid, 91). Thus, the writer-prisoner seeks out disalienation in regards to and separate from the colonization into which he was literally and philosophically “thrown.”

Taken together, these texts are examinations of, and guidebooks through, a process of rebirth and becoming. For any subject living and struggling in an oppressive space, the process of “decolonization” or “disalienation”—as I’m using them here, on the
personal level—is meant to describe the reintegration of the prisoner’s fragmented psyche and sense of being, a process of ridding “the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence” (Wretched 51). Whether or not the prisoner is released from custody is less important than the development of a higher consciousness and the passing on of the tools through the writing, so that others may benefit.

This is crucial. For the ontological status of the black subject is allowed neither its stability nor its potentiality, neither its peaceful existence as body in freedom nor its mutability as a being with hopes and dreams: “I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance” (BSWM 95). If “free” black bodies are relegated to a state of, as Fanon calls it, “certain uncertainty”—what, then, can be said of the condition of incarcerated black bodies?

Binding these decolonial narratives together is the racial component, another irreducible element that Fanon establishes from the start: “In the colonies, the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (Wretched 5). His curious use of parallelism seems at first to be too reductive, an oversimplification. To quote Gramsci, “Another proposition of Marx is that a popular conviction often has the same energy as a material force or something of the kind, which is extremely significant” (377, emphasis mine). Thus, race becomes a “material force”—hence the base appropriating aspects of the superstructure—because race makes the cause (economic relations) appear to be the effect of being white. We can see how this “logic” may be used in reverse, and how applicable it would be to the prison regime (you’re a convict because you’re black,
you’re black because you’re a convict). We argue that some of our most notable prison narratives penned by prominent African American authors have documented this process of decolonization stage by stage: the recognition and reconstitution of “a new language and a new humanity” (Wretched 2). We’ll look closely at three of them: The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Soul on Ice by Eldridge Cleaver, and Assata: An Autobiography by Assata Shakur. With some help from Fanon, Gramsci, Camus and others, we’ll trace the progression, through personal narrative, of the successive stages of decolonization, “the terrain on which [they] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.” (Gramsci 377). A new revolutionary consciousness, with language as its medium.

The “Native” or “Colonized” Phase

“Blackness” is both a creation of colonialism/slavery and an identity that becomes its own form of imprisonment. The native subject is initially beholden to the colonist, seemingly deferential while seething inside. Fanon renders this phase throughout Wretched as needed, often relying on tropes associated with dehumanization, like animal imagery. The colonized is “dominated but not domesticated” (16). They’re wanting to discard “their animal status for a human one” (ibid). As a decolonized subject looking back over his life, Malcolm X flashes back to this phase, when he was “Living like an animal; thinking like an animal” (293). “When you become an animal, a vulture, in the ghetto as I had become, you enter into a world of animals and vultures” (105). Here “vultursim” serves as a metaphor for the parasitic environment of 1940s Harlem. We see here, also, the allusion to mimetic contagion, how growing up in a predator and prey situation leaves the subject little choice. “The colonized subject,” Fanon claims, “is a
persecuted man who is forever dreaming of becoming the persecutor” (*Wretched* 16). It’s easy to see how a predatory, zero-sum mentality like this prevents one from achieving not only consciousness, but acknowledgement of one’s humanity. “In simple words,” Camus argues, “man is not recognized—and does not recognize himself—as long he limits himself to subsisting like an animal” (138). The bulk of the struggle is characterized by envy and rapacity. “The only Negroes who really had any money,” Malcolm points out, “were the ones in the numbers racket or who ran the gambling houses or in some other way lived parasitically off the poorest ones, who were the masses” (6). The implication is that, as a younger man, he would not have regarded such behavior as “parasitic”—“I bet my working vocabulary wasn’t two hundred words” (137)—but what he sees now as parasitism is synonymous with what he *had* regarded as mere survival. It is for this reason that ontology as described by Sartre and other existentialists is insufficient, for it fails to “understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience” (*BSWM* 90). “All of our experiences fuse into our personality,” Malcolm writes, “Everything that has ever happened to us is an ingredient” (153). Malcolm’s entire book is a meditation on the dialectic between being and becoming, navigating one’s burning desire (at times literally) with the lived experience. “When [whites] like me,” Fanon explains, “they tell me my color has nothing to do with it. When they hate me, they add that it’s not because of my color. Either way, *I’m a prisoner of the vicious circle*” (*BSWM*, my emphasis). “Native” Malcolm doesn’t even have *that* much. He’s circling his own demons within the confines of the white man’s cell, a literal incarceration in addition to the existential one as described by Fanon.
The opening chapters of Malcolm’s book largely depict his obsession with outward appearances: “Everybody understood that my head had to stay kinky awhile longer….I had saved about half enough to get a zoot” (53-4). But the subtext reveals that his drive is simply, and finally, the acknowledgement of his humanity by others, the “primitive and passionate desire for recognition” (Camus 139). But the scene where Malcolm receives his first “conk” is surely the lowest point of his existence as a colonized subject, as he himself confesses: “This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair” (56). This entire phase is characterized by stifled envy: “And it’s true,” Fanon argues, “there is not one colonized subject who at least once a day does not dream of taking the place of the colonist” (Wretched 5). The surest way of identifying the “native” phase is the subject’s mimicry of the colonist, the difference being that he preys on his own people. The exploitative nature of colonialism has yet to be acknowledged, let alone subverted. Coveting the “settlers’ place” implies that such a place is desirable, an existence steeped in soullessness and materialism. “Throughout this whole time in my life,” Malcolm admits, “I really was dead—mentally dead. I just didn’t know I was” (128).

Like Malcolm, Eldridge Cleaver writes as a decolonized intellectual, looking back on his “nativism.” In the late 1950s, possession of marijuana qualified Cleaver for indictment under the Boggs Act, a sentence basically guaranteed to net a black teenager two to five years in the penitentiary (Alexander 207). “Of course I’d always known that I was black,” Cleaver says of the time, “but I’d never really stopped to take stock of what I 29 Shakur, incidentally, covers this material as well, adding the euphemistic element: “At the time my hair was conked, but the hairdresser said it was ‘relaxed’” (174).
was involved in. I met life as an individual and took my chances” (21-2). Cleaver’s initial stint in prison served to inculcate, he implies, a “colonized” feeling of desperation and insularity. “I would accept nothing,” he recalls, “until it was proved that it was good—for me” (24). This is the same mis-channeling that Fanon describes in the primary phase, the compulsion to assert oneself as an individual: a “false theory,” he claims, adding that “the petty individualists will soon find out for themselves” (Wretched 13). The germ of Cleaver’s “finding out” would take the form of a new conviction, this time for rape, which he calls an “insurrectionary act.” Thus, he was cognizant enough to realize that he was raging against some larger apparatus, yet he still lacked the awareness to properly channel that rage. At this stage, Cleaver “wanted to send waves of consternation throughout the white race” (33)—a mind-frame that echoes Fanon’s image of the subject who “is always ready to change his role as game for that of hunter” (Wretched 16). The important thing is what we infer from Cleaver’s bold admission (“insurrectionary act”): that herein lies the seed of Cleaver’s inchoate consciousness. “And since all action is political,” Gramsci argues, “the real philosophy of each man is contained in its entirety in his political action” (326). Like Fanon, Cleaver is taking us through a process which “can only find its significance and become self-coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance” (Wretched 2). The process cannot be rushed; the subject needs to understand the historical conditions behind the psychological ones.

Raised by her grandparents, Assata Shakur recalls them associating “pride and dignity” with “position and money,” and being determined that their granddaughter would “become part of Wilmington’s talented tenth—the privileged class—part of the so-
called black bourgeoisies” (21). This is part and parcel of the process, according to Fanon, whereby the colonized subject is already interpellated into the “narcissistic monologue [of] the colonialist bourgeoisie…implant[ing] in the minds of the colonized that the essential values—meaning Western values—remain eternal despite all errors attributable to man” (Wretched 11). Shakur’s grandparents in this respect represent the “sentinels on duty”—guarding, unwittingly, the “proper” bourgeois values and handing them down to a young Assata. Gramsci describes this as the means by which ideology “propagate[s] itself throughout society—bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity…creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups” (181-2). Shakur recalls her grandparents imploring her to “abandon [her] penchant for alley rats and play with ‘decent children.’ But we could never agree on who ‘decent children’ were” (21). Clearly, the black children with whom Shakur connected with were deemed unbecoming in the eyes of her caretakers. Surely, they felt as though they had her best interest in mind, but we can see how deep-seated these colonized roots are. Of course, Fanon, throughout his work, reflects on this intergenerational “aid” provided by colonized elders on behalf of the powers that be. “[W]hen exhausted after a sixteen-hour day of hard work the colonized subject collapses on his mat and a child on the other side of the canvas partition cries and prevents him from sleeping, it just so happens it’s a little Algerian” (Wretched 231). The child unwittingly absorbs these oppressions as her nascent subjectivity is being inscribed: a sort of divide and conquer strategy at work even as the colonist sleeps soundly in his own comfortable bed, in a “sector built to last […] where the streets are clean and smooth, without a pothole, without a stone” (ibid 4).
Shakur’s indoctrination into the “black bourgeoises” at the hands of her grandparents was both totalizing and subtle, replete with the sort of euphemistic language tailormade to fit the code. This includes encouraging young Shakur to eventually choose a mate with “good hair” and “thin lips.” She describes the ideal partner: “A cute boy was tall, slim but well built, and usually had light skin. Hazel and green eyes were the best [...] but in general the boys we talked about were tall, not too dark, and handsome” (71). Handsomeness is, of course, synonymous with the aforementioned attributes. “We had been completely brainwashed and we didn’t even know it,” she reflects. “We accepted the white value systems and white standards of beauty and, at times, we accepted the white man’s view of ourselves” (31). All of this was, of course, buttressed by what was occurring on the superstructural level. Shakur describes her early schooling as the “kind of education that produces people who don’t have the ability to think for themselves and who are easily manipulated” (35). Black students are routinely challenged to “speak ‘properly’ as [the whites] did, and…that Black people (we called ourselves negroes then) could do whatever white people could do and that we could appreciate what they appreciated” (37). “All colonized people,” Fanon explains, “position themselves in relation to the civilizing language….The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush” (BSWM 2). Even at her local church, there were two kinds of sin: “[A] venal sin that’s not so bad; it’s a white sin. But a mortal sin is terrible; it is a black sin” (41). This merely “relieves the oppressor of all responsibility since the cause of wrong-doing, poverty, and the inevitable can be attributed to God” (Wretched 18). Thus, the situation for Fanon in 1950s Antilles is every bit as applicable to 1950s North Carolina. Whiteness is, for the colonized subject, not
only a possibility but a perpetual aspiration: “For the black man, there is but one destiny. And it is white” (BSWM 202).

The “Semiconscious” or “Interregnum” phase

Having internalized the struggle for so long, the colonized begins the “cathartic process” which, if seen through, leads to phase three. Gramsci describes his theoretical version:

Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives… the cathartic process coincides with a chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic. (367)

Again, we see the blurring of the base and superstructure, the concrete (“structures”; “instrument”) and the abstract (“forces”; “ethico-political”) bearing down upon the colonized, inducing what Fanon describes, literally and figuratively, as “muscular tension.” Fanon, as well, describes the evolution-in-progress: “Gradually, imperceptibly, the need for a decisive confrontation imposes itself and is eventually felt by the great majority of the people” (Wretched 172). And likewise, Camus describes how the native “suspects—and wishes to preserve—the existence of certain things on this side of the borderline” (13). Something is bubbling to the surface, slowly. It’s essentially the calm before the storm.

Malcolm X marks this phase by way of expressing not a shock, but a hint of recognition. He’d begun pimping at this point in the narrative, and we get the sense, somehow, that the seeds for his transformation were being sown: “I got my first schooling about the cesspool morals of the white man from the best possible source, from
his own women. And as I got deeper into my own life of evil, I saw the white man’s morals with my own eyes. I even made my living helping to guide him to the sick things he wanted” (94). The focalization blurs ever so slightly (particularly in the final sentence). We feel a smidge of then blended with the now, as though young Malcolm were just beginning to wake up. Fanon describes the transition: “The rich no longer seem respectable men but flesh-eating beasts, jackals and ravens who wallow in the blood of the people” (Wretched 133). Now it’s important to track the progression here—the “interregnum” as Gramsci calls it—for the colonized have yet to shed their “bestial” skin. Not long after his arrest on burglary charges, Malcolm describes his mood as “ill-tempered as a snake”; “I would pace for hours like a caged leopard, viciously cursing aloud to myself” (155-6). Fanon’s metaphor for this is “violence rippling under the skin” (Wretched 31), but perhaps Gramsci provides the better description: “[T]he old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (276). Fanon devotes an entire chapter in Wretched to these symptoms, “Colonial War and Mental Disorders,” wherein he unpacks the “constant and considerable stream of mental symptoms [which] are direct sequels of this oppression” (182). The colonial subject is stuck in limbo: unable to conceal, but not yet able to channel, his frustration and pain.

From his own cell, Cleaver suffers a crisis similar to that of Malcolm: pangs of torment manifesting in physical symptoms. It’s the tail end of Jim Crow, when the national sense of consciousness was arguably even more taxing psychologically, for now a layer of pretense had been added: blacks had no reason to be “unhappy”: “We accepted the indignities and the mechanics of the apparatus of oppression” (22). After learning
about the murder of Emmett Till, Cleaver happens upon a photo of the woman that Till had allegedly “dishonored.” “I felt that tension in the center of my chest,” Cleaver admits, “when a woman appeals to me” (29). Realizing how easily it could have been him—for the same “crime”—Cleaver still doesn’t have the tools he needs to work productively. He incorporates this anecdote into the larger theme of taboo involving interracial sex, the cognitive dissonance that accompanies it, and the symptoms that manifest as a result. Fanon devotes an entire chapter in *Black Skin White Masks* to this phenomenon, “The Man of Color and the White Woman.” In in, Fanon makes clear what Cleaver only implies: that the fetishizing of the white woman is in fact a psychological reaction to colonization. “Between these white breasts that my wandering hands fondle,” Fanon says with some irony, “white civilization and worthiness become mine” (45).

As colonized subjects, Emmett Till and Eldridge Cleaver are “always presumed guilty” (*Wretched* 16). “The colonist keeps the colonized in a state of rage, which he prevents from boiling over” (ibid 17). Which is a way of saying that the tension, lacking a productive outlet, continues its internal toil. Cleaver describes his psyche at this stage: “Two days later [after obsessing over the woman’s photo], I had a ‘nervous breakdown.’ For several days I ranted and raved against the white race, against white women in particular, against white America in general” (30). As a psychiatrist in colonial Algeria, Fanon had seen this all too often. The symptoms were fairly consistent: “[T]he psyche retracts, is obliterated, and finds an outlet through muscular spasms that have caused many an expert to classify the colonized as hysterical” (*Wretched* 19). Projection, during this phase, is a fairly common reaction. Fanon goes so far as to offer a two-pronged
diagnosis for patients suffering from Cleaver’s particular symptoms, along with a general prescription:

1) My patient is suffering from an inferiority complex. His psychic structure is in danger of disintegrating. Measures have to be taken to safeguard him and gradually liberate him from this unconscious desire.

2) If he is overcome to such a degree by a desire to be white, it’s because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that draws its strength by maintaining this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race over another; it is to the extent that society creates difficulties for him that he finds himself positioned in such a neurotic situation. (*BSWM* 80)

In this phase, the problem, even if diagnosed, is still failing to find any productive outlet, still manifesting in misdirected hostility. The subject has yet to discern the logic behind cause and effect. Bear in mind, the oppressor’s greatest fear is the sudden “realization by the blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (*Biko* 68). They fear that the oppressed will see the “weapon” for what it really is: an incarceration of the mind, a hoodwinking, a lie. Cleaver continues with the aftermath of his “nervous breakdown”:

I had several sessions with a psychiatrist. His conclusion was that I hated my mother. How he arrived at this conclusion I’ll never know, because he knew nothing about my mother; and when he’d ask me questions I would answer him with absurd lies. What revolted me about him was that he had heard me denouncing the whites, yet each time he interviewed me he deliberately guided
the conversation back to my family life, to my childhood. That in itself was all right, but he deliberately blocked all my attempts to bring out the racial question, and he made it clear that he was not interested in my attitude toward whites. This was a Pandoras box he did not care to open. (30)

Ndiovu describes this as “the period in which the coping mechanism of colonized individuals finally collapses as the result of the extraordinary circumstances that colonialism imposes upon the ‘natives’” (58). Aptly put. This is the result of that “vicious circle” made even smaller, the “fragments” scattered about in their disintegration.

The layers of stratification continue for Shakur as she moves from childhood to adolescence and early adulthood alongside the “educated brothers” who attempt to school her. She describes the prototypical role model as follows: “He drinks Remy Martin cognac and Harvey’s Bristol Cream, uses a cologne I can’t pronounce, and I wait, expectantly, for him to tell me his brand of toothpaste. He goes on and on about his trinkets and status symbols” (153). “[I]n order to be recognized as men and equal human beings,” Ndiovu explains, “they have to assimilate” (60). It’s a double-edged sword, of course, a paradox: “[T]he black subject becomes uprooted from his own culture; yet the culture that she flings herself to does not accord to her complete recognition as a human being” (ibid). This is cultural/intellectual alienation made manifest, the semiconscious seeking of “a passport to high social status and recognition as men as opposed to Negroes or ‘natives’” (ibid 62). This, argues Ndiovu, is what we might call “white mask neurosis,” whereby “a slippage between identity and social status is created” (ibid 80).

It was about this time, however, that Shakur started to notice that something was “happening to [her], a change that has been a long time coming” (154). It’s during this
interim phase that the colonized who has opened herself up to dis-alienation begins to see the cracks and fissures, the airs and pretensions. “In every country in the world there are social climbers,” Fanon explains, “those who think they’ve arrived. And opposite them there are those who keep the notion of their origins” (BSWM 20). Shakur, during this phase, maintains the appearance of the former while feeling rumblings of the latter. “I’m not quite sure what freedom is,” she admits, “but I know damn well what it ain’t. How have we gotten so silly, I wonder” (155).

This feeling of confusion is indicative of the same sleight of hand employed by both colonialism and capitalism: making it appear as though the effect is the cause; Shakur and her peers feel colonized because of their inferiority complex, not the other way around. They begin policing each other’s thoughts and behaviors, a phenomenon described by postcolonial theorist Aimé Césaire as the “manufacture” of “subordinate functionaries” who unwittingly serve the oppressor: “I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, to kneel, despair, and behave like flunkeys” (43). There’s a spectrum here, of course, with degrees of “flunkeyism,” some blindly following the colonist’s code while others, like Shakur, beginning to “wonder.” The former, having much further to go, may find it socially and economically expedient to remain in line while the latter, with considerably more to lose, may end up like Shakur: on the FBI’s most wanted list, living in exile.

The tipping point for Shakur seems to have occurred during a meeting with a “black executive” at the employment agency where she worked as a typist. Here she receives a lesson in both government bureaucracy and innocent complicity. Black college
graduates had travelled to New York from all over the country to attend an “equal opportunity conference”—a job fair for people of color, basically, but it wasn’t cheap: “Some of those Black graduates had spent hundreds of dollars to come to the conference and didn’t have one interview. The only graduates the corporations even wanted to see were math, science, engineering, and business majors” (157). Flummoxed, Shakur expresses her frustration to her executive friend, who kindly disabuses her. In order to secure their government contracts, he explains, the corporations need only to appear to pursue “qualified Black personnel,” not actually hire them. Césaire alludes to “their rigged investigations, their self-serving generalizations, their tendentious speculations, their insistence on the marginal, ‘separate’ character of the non-whites” (56)—it all tracks. Gramsci talks about this somewhat cynically in the context of “economic practicality”: “[A] certain compromise equilibrium should be formed…the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind. Bu there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic” (161). Simply put, hire a few token blacks if you must, but keep the bottom line secure. Fanon, as usual, doesn’t mince words: “[T]he colonized subject must be aware that it is not colonialism which makes the concessions but him” (Wretched 93). Shakur, realizing in hindsight that she’d taken the bait, foreshadows her impending evolution to phase three: “I was part of the plot and I didn’t even know it” (157).

“Decolonized” or “Disalienated” Phase

“When he rebels,” Camus claims, “a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical. But for
the moment we are only talking of the kind of solidarity that is born in chains” (17). Camus uses the “rebel” or “slave” metaphor in place of the “colonized” or “prisoner,” but the analogue works. He essentially begins his book with the previous phase, noting only that “Up to this point [the colonized] has at least remained silent and has abandoned himself to the form of despair in which a condition is accepted even though it is considered unjust” (14). Though Malcolm, Cleaver, and Shakur are all still “in chains” when they reach phase three, they’re no longer silent; they’re ready to eschew “natural egoism” for “human solidarity.” All the necessary tools have been acquired, so the goal now is dissemination: educate the masses. This is where the writing comes in, but often we have a moment within the text itself, a consciousness-inducing scene of catharsis whereby the colonized is finally able to move “beyond the point he had reached simply by refusing. He exceeds the bounds he had fixed for his antagonist and now demands to be treated as an equal” (Camus 14).

For Malcolm, the beginning of this phase comes as he converts to Islam and begins to engage, as he says, “with some of the first serious thoughts I had ever had in my life” (164). He’d always been into hustling, preying on his own kind, which he’d accepted as a necessary “evil”—but now he was realizing that he’d been duped, coerced by the “prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci 12). He reports, in montage, the scene that leads to his anagnorisis:

The whites in New York City—the cops, the white criminals I’d dealt with…the whites who piled into the Negro speakeasies for a taste of Negro soul…the white
women who wanted Negro men…the men I’d steered to the black “specialty sex” they wanted….The fence back in Boston, and his ex-cop representative…. (163)

As Malcolm “flashes back” from his cell, we recall these episodes from their (more fleshed out) original depictions. What makes this so significant—and this goes on for about half a page—is that it’s really the only time we’re focalized solely through young Malcolm. Thus, we can read the ellipses (which are in the original) as his awakening, his mind turning. As a narrator, Malcolm X is actually quite intrusive, often breaking the fourth wall, like he does here: “I want to say before I go on that I have never previously told anyone my sordid past in detail….I had sunk to the very bottom of the American white man’s society when—soon now, in prison—I found Allah and the religion of Islam and it completely transformed my life” (153). But arguably, the culmination of this phase, for Malcolm, materializes when he breaks with the Nation of Islam to form his own mosque. Having been betrayed by Elijah Muhammad and expelled from his organization, Malcolm makes his journey to Mecca, from where he pens an open letter to his loved ones back home:

Despite my firmest convictions, I have been always a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it….During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug)—while praying to the same God—with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blonde, and whose skin was the whitest of white. (347)
According to Fanon, we feel alienated because of our place in history, not in spite of it, and only through taking this into consideration can we begin to “disalienate” ourselves: “Disalienation will be for those Whites and Blacks who have refused to let themselves be locked in the substantialized ‘tower of the past’” (*BSWM* 201). History has its own internal logic that tends to make the historical appear axiomatic, the cultural appear natural. We need to avoid being imprisoned by the past while remaining open to the mutability of the present. It is not our grievances over the past that galvanize us to revolt, Malcolm finally realizes, but the current conditions under which we are living. “With rebellion,” Camus argues, “awareness is born” (15). It’s not an unspoken past that drives the struggle, but the “acting in the name of certain values which are indeterminate but which [the rebel] feels are common to himself and to all men” (ibid 16). Even Gramsci weighs in on this, arguing that “American negroes have a national and racial spirit which is negative rather than positive, one which is a product of the struggle carried on by the whites in order to isolate or depress them” (21). The implication here is not to be missed: since it was through the oppressor’s own struggle that colonization/alienation was won to begin with, it is only through the negation of this negation, through the counter-struggle, that decolonization /disalienation is achieved. The perpetuation of false essentialism—the black or white “spirit” is a myth. Liberation is to be found in the becoming, never the being.

“Malcolm X had a special meaning for black convicts,” writes Cleaver. “A former prisoner himself, he had risen from the depths to great heights. For this reason he was a symbol of hope” (81). As with Malcolm, Cleaver’s transition comes gradually, but cathartically: “I had to seek out the truth and unravel the snarled web of my
motivations….I understood that what had happened to me had also happened to countless other blacks and it would happen to many, many more” (34). Cleaver’s case is interesting because his entre into the system involved a marijuana conviction: a “crime” which today would net him probation, if that. Instead, he goes to the penitentiary, where he encounters racist guards (26), aloof psychiatrists (30), and a system which was “simply another form of the oppression which [blacks] have known all their lives” (81). That he went in as a pothead and came out as a man capable of rape lends heft to Foucault’s argument that “prison fails to eliminate crime [but] has succeeded extremely well in producing delinquency” (DP 277)—or to put it another way, the least desirables are conveniently recycled back into the system. It took a second stint for Cleaver to breakthrough, but now he is able to connect his own situation with colonized subjects around the globe: “[T]he blood of Vietnamese peasants has paid off all my debts” (37). And later, “[Revolutionaries] exist concealed in the shadows wherever colored people had known oppression by whites, by white enslavers, imperialists, and neocolonialists” (81). This speaks to Fanon’s larger theme, beyond Algeria, beyond the African diaspora, to encompass the driving forces behind imperialist campaigns and colonial oppression, the fact that “for centuries the capitalists have behaved like real war criminals in the underdeveloped world” (Wretched 57).

Unlike other revolutionary authors—Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson—Shakur was radicalized on the street, not in prison. While never a high-ranking militant, she was privy to things that were happening with the BLA and BPP (Black Liberation Army and Black Panther Party) that her caged comrades could not have known, and hence her decolonization is, like Malcolm’s, more transcendent, more
complete. It goes beyond the epiphanic consciousness with which we’re familiar (and which Shakur devotes relatively few words to) and into the problems of organized militancy. Too many comrades, she claims, were falling into what she calls a “roboton bag”: “They repeated slogans and phrases without understanding their complete meaning, often resulting in dogmatic and shortsighted practices” (222). Gramsci reflects on the prototypical group-thinking mass who “for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it…[but] its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate” (327).

Even worse, Shakur began to harbor doubts about the leadership. “When Huey [Newton] changed his title from defense minister to the ridiculous-sounding ‘Supreme Commander’ and then to the even more ridiculous ‘Supreme Servant,’ damn near nobody said a word” (226). So, we can see the problem here for a decolonizing mind, caught between automatons on the one hand and narcissistic authoritarians on the other: she realizes that the center cannot hold, that it’s only a matter of time before the momentum dissipates and the movement collapses. Fanon explains: “The leader is so out of touch with the masses that he manages to convince himself they resent his authority and question the service he has rendered….The leader is a harsh judge of the ingratitude of the masses and every day a little more resolutely sides with the exploiters” (Wretched 112). Paranoia giving way to duplicity and scandal: Malcolm had seen this happening with Elijah Muhammad and now Shakur sees it happening with Huey Newton: “Huey was living in a $650-a-month apartment in Oakland….Panthers who owned little more than the clothes on their backs
were out in the street in the freezing cold weather selling papers, with big pieces of cardboard in their shoes and with flimsy jackets” (230).

The central component of decolonization of the mind—the reason achieving it is so difficult—is that it requires, ultimately, the dismantling of one’s deep-seated belief system, down the line. Malcolm’s acknowledgement that his “faith had been shaken in a way that [he] can never really describe” (301); Cleaver’s admission that he had lost his self-respect, that his “pride as a man dissolved and [his] whole fragile moral structure seemed to collapse” (34); and Shakur’s realization that the “revolutionary creativity” that she’d wholeheartedly embraced had been “replaced by dogmatic stagnation” (231)—these were clearly painful, life-altering realizations. But we have seen how completely, how surreptitiously, the black psyche has been affected by colonialism. These “jailhouse epiphanies” speak directly to Fanon’s call for a new humanism: one that rejects both the Eurocentric view of humanity and the grievance-based view, to avoid both the ideology of the oppressor and confinement within the “tower of the past.”

Unlike Sartrean alienation, Fanonian alienation is not framed in terms of a lack: “My black consciousness does not claim to be a loss. It is” (BSWM 114). This is precisely what these prisoners are resisting with their writing—the is-ness that is always already an imposition, a historically-imposed sedimented otherness: “The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am fixed” (ibid 95). Thus, Fanon’s image of “congealed black blood” is precisely that: an objectified blackness, a “zone of nonbeing.” Ndiovu argues that colonialism “seeks to ensure that blacks do not become critical and independent thinkers, but rather are perpetually dependent on the colonizing race” (70). Incarceration, then, takes this a step further, a non-ness of being beyond the original
imposition: “I repeat, I was walled in” (*BSWM* 97). Sartre’s ontological proof—this “lack”—is thus, in the case of the black subject, lacking-in-itself. For, to be “lacking” presupposes that black bodies are somewhat well positioned to begin with; the incarcerated black body is hemmed in even further: a “zone of non-nonbeing.”

Throughout his texts, Fanon makes clear that the real battle lies within: that, sans a successful transformation to consciousness, the whole affair is futile: “We must not expect the nation to produce new men. We must not expect men to change imperceptibly as the revolution constantly innovates. It is true both processes are important, but it is the consciousness that needs help” (*Wretched* 229). It’s a theme that lies at the core of all the texts under analysis, the deprogramming of the colonized/alienated mind, which, for some, is tantamount to scrubbing decades of hegemonic influence—this phenomenon, according to Shakur, that “a lot of us still act like we’re back on the plantation with massa pulling the strings” (116).

Achieving the decolonized mind has mainly to do with the acquiring and deploying of language, which each text makes abundantly clear. “In every free moment I had,” Malcolm says, “[I]f I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk…I never had been so truly free in my life” (176). There’s no irony here: he’s freer in prison knowing that “all the untruths planted within him by the oppressor are eliminated” (*Wretched* 233). “I want to devote my time to reading and writing,” Cleaver says, “with everything else secondary” (71). Without the ability to express oneself in words, Gramsci argues, the subject will be imprisoned in a “fossilized” mind, “anachronistic in relation to

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30 Ndiovu writes: “The denial of possibility, of nonbeing, leads to a deep sense of nausea and helplessness in a word, colonial despair” (85). Imagine that: the black prisoner must transcend incarceration before even having the *luxury* of being nauseas, helpless, and despairing. Upon release, should that even occur, another mountain to climb.
the major currents of thought which dominate world history” (325). Educating oneself first and then others is the key to eradicating the “stratified deposits”—the unseen culprits, the mental firewalls that continually keep subjects from recognizing their own consent embedded within the coercion, the “mood of submission and inhibition which considerably eases the task of the agents of law and order” (Wretched 4). The central theme running through all these texts, creative and philosophical, is that it’s the superstructure’s “job” to make the inequities of the base seem somehow natural. But as Gramsci argues, the “starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (324). Or as Fanon puts it, “I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction” (BSWM 204).
A machinic reception. – Head down, follow the yellow line. Another maze-like hallway, another sharp turn, caterwauls reverberating off the concrete, a lone leader bellowing over the noise: *Keep moving, nuts to butts!* Follow the body in front of you. The jailers are about as calloused as humans can be. Not meanness for the sake of it, probably, just an aggressive strain of antipathy. This is what Nuremberg was like, you think—and Yale, except for Stanley Milgram in his white lab coat we have mostly non-white ex-military in muted green. *It’s essential that you continue with the experiment.* They’re not sadistic by nature; they’re playing dress up. They’re just following orders.

*Blue line to cell B, let’s go!*

The search-out room resembles a gym, rectangular, packed with (mostly) brown bodies. There’s a yellow line going around the perimeter, a red line just inside of it. You’re warehoused with about twenty others for inspection: forty palms flush against the wall, as instructed. *If there is ANYTHING holding up your pants, remove it!* Large men run their hands harshly over bent bodies, bodies that squirm and wriggle but don’t resist. It’s too late for that. *Remove your shoes!* (Clearly some are in charge, others are new like you.) One large one paces red-faced, shoulders back. *When I say GO you’re gonna remove your socks. You’re gonna do this by peeling them off your feet, inside out.* Hold one sock in each hand. Hold them out in front of you while you’re looking down at the ground. *Do not shake ‘em, wave ‘em, snap ‘em or swing ‘em. Go!*

Now it’s your turn to be searched. Submit to the procedure: the cop aggressively groping your crotch, up and down each appendage, no crevice unviolated. There’s no contraband but you’re subjugated all the same. Again, it’s time to march. *If you have a long-sleeve shirt on, roll up the sleeve covering your wristband. We’re not concerned*
with your name. All we want to see is the metal clasp. Have your wristband ready to be scanned. Yellow line, cell one!

Classification feels like forced speed dating through tempered glass, but all your dates pre-hate you, glance at you while tapping away on an old Dell desktop. Each utilizes a speak-thru apparatus, you hold a receiver. Have any tattoos? Yes. Have you ever been in the military? No. Are you homeless? No. Are you taking any prescription medication? No. Thinking about killing yourself? Not just yet.

You wait to be live-scanned, a biometrics procedure that will scrutinize and record your physicality: fingerprints and photographs are, like everything else now, in “the cloud.” Follow the blue line to another holding area, whereupon you’re ordered to strip. Minions canvass with blue net bags, collecting street clothes. Now you’re standing shoulder to shoulder with twenty dudes: all of us holding our junk, dehumanized. Then it’s off to the showers, a seemingly endless row of spouts lining concrete walls. You’re barely even wet when someone pelts you with white powder. Rub it all over your body! (They no longer use DDT, at least.) Another long hallway, another gymnasium, naked bodies side by side, deputies perched on the periphery, armed with two species of spray gun. What teargas will accomplish that pepper spray won’t isn’t entirely clear. Okay, now all of you turn around and bend over! Spread your cheeks! Now squat and cough!

Here a young dreadlocked man draws the line. Fuck you, motherfuckers! Y’all can kiss my fuckin’ ass! Ain’t takin’ this shit no mo!

There’s a scuffle and the perp is overpowered, seized by the neck, and subdued to the ground. They pin him in four-point restraints and wheel him off like beef. Your chest
blood lurches. Had a full-scale riot broken out, how would you—new white fish—have handled yourself?

Every man gets his county blues. Some receive yellow pants (later you will learn that they have declared themselves to be either gay or insane: same pants either way). Now you’re in what appears to be the nucleus of the IRC, which resembles the lobby of any overcrowded, underfunded urban hospital. Rows of metal benches and whitewashed walls, windows reinforced with metal caging. Seems odd that they’d be playing music let alone Metallica, but there it is, usurping the soundscape. Sleep with one eye open/gripping your pillow tight. Exit light. Enter night. Take my hand. We’re off to never-never land. The guy beside you is playing air guitar, says he “knows how this goes.”

He’s white and beefy, slightly disheveled, an unruly mullet on his head. His hands are dirty, his pants yellow. “It’s not really that hard,” you say, hoping not to offend. He seems not to mind, maybe because it’s chow time. No need to be grabby; sacks are abundant. Your neighbor puts down his guitar and opens his lunch. He punctures the jelly packet, holds it higher than necessary, and squeezes out a long purplish ooze that spills onto his bread. You got bologna; it’s a lottery. Add a little mustard and pretend it’s a hot dog.

“Name’s Rambo,” he says. You look at him skeptically, so he shows you his wristband. His fucking name is Rambo. Mother was a big fan of the movie, he explains. “Had high hopes for me back then. Now I’m headed to the towers.” He asks how you’re classified. You’re not sure, you say, maybe segregation. He studies your wristband, sees that you’re K-11. “High power,” he says, looking you over. “Don’t look like no killer to me.” You lean in closer. This is risky. Disclose to the wrong person that you’re related to
a cop and you’ll get jacketed a punk, snitch, or some species of jailhouse bitch. Rambo just nods, holds up his wrist. He’s K-6, headed to queen’s row. Your secret is safe with him.

You wait hours to be X-rayed for tuberculosis. Then you’re ushered through medical screening. The doctor asks you if you want to hurt yourself. No, you say. She asks if there are voices talking to you. You’re tempted to yes, hers is, but flirting in here seems futile. If I were to put a rope in front of you, what, if anything, would you do with it? Objection, calls for speculation.

*Follow the yellow line to cell one, hands in your pockets!*

A CO escorts you to a holding cell. Concrete benches line the walls, large white bricks like in grade school. Sit on the cold hard floor, thankful to be alone. Peruse the graffiti, etched into the paint via some elusive sharp object. There’s reinforced glass on either side of the steel door, and a window on the door itself, all designed to impede privacy. You can see the holding cells across the way where bodies stir. A female jailer with a dry erase marker walks by and scrawls ƎTIHW on your window. Across the hall she scribbles BLACK and on an adjacent one, HISP. That the holding cells are segregated is unsurprising, but this coralling of human cargo according to skin color—it’s disheartening. It’s like a flesh factory.

The disengaging of the lock—*CLA-CLANK*— sends a jolt. You hadn’t dozed off, just zoned out. A man enters, shuffles around, and lies down contentedly, tucking a roll of toilet paper under his head (anything could be a pillow, except an actual one). He informs you that he’s in for statutory. *She was seventeen, I swear.* Just the two of you for now, but across the way the cells are already overcrowded. Privilege even in here, ghettos
wildly unbalanced. No attention is paid to severity of crime or level of guilt. *We’re not concerned with your name.* Just a lot of blue and yellow, bodies that follow, and cells that contain.
Once he said, “Marxism was my hustle.” – Greg Armstrong, George Jackson’s editor

Among a small academic circle, the use of a quote from George Jackson’s prison text, *Soledad Brother*, which appears in the latter half of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s first collaboration, *Anti-Oedipus: Capital and Schizophrenia*, is the subject of some controversy. Upon first reading *Anti-Oedipus*, one wonders just when Jackson’s name will garner mention. Inspired by the events of May ’68, the book is considered to be sort of a Marxist-revolutionary uber-work, a must-read for anyone interested in poststructural theory and far left philosophy generally. And it’s irreverent: almost like a punk rock/hip hop version of academic writing, replete with “samples” dropped in featuring some big thinkers, poets, and revolutionary comrades. Thus, it would have been strange for the authors to have left Jackson, whose bombshell text had recently been translated and was causing a stir among French intellectuals, uncited. Odd, then, to refer to the endnote which corresponds to Jackson’s quote—a single cryptic line from his seminal text—on page 277 of the English translation and to encounter a dead end. A space has in fact been created for endnote number 5, where the number is listed between reference notes for Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (endnote 4) and Allen Ginsburg’s *Kaddish* (endnote 6), but then, where Jackson’s reference should be, there’s a literal lacuna—a lack.

We’re not the first to have noticed this, of course. At least two other researchers have noted the anomaly, the first of whom is Duke University’s Michelle Koerner, who
elaborates on the oddity, citing a pattern: “Each time Jackson’s name appears in Deleuze’s work it is without introduction, explanation, or elaboration, as though the line were ripped entirely from historical considerations” (161). It’s true. In addition to Anti-Oedipus, the same line cribbed from Jackson’s text appears in both A Thousand Plateaus, again with Guattari, and in Dialogues II, which Deleuze coauthored with Claire Parnet; and in both cases, the line is technically plagiarized. Taija McDougall, from the University of California at Irvine, describes the gaffe as “an immense failure of editing, proofreading and all the labor that goes into issuing [and] translating editions of academic works” (3). Point taken: one can’t just blame the authors. In all three cases, there have been numerous opportunities to correct this issue: multiple publishers, editors, and translators have overseen these texts through numerous editions over several decades, and still the errors (?) remain. While it’s true that Deleuze and Guattari (hereafter cited as D&G) tend to play fast and loose with their source material31, their use of Jackson presents at least two peculiarities. First, most of the other literary source material (Joyce, Burroughs, Ginsburg, Lawrence, Rimbaud, et al), is not only cited properly but cited widely, within and across texts, with at least some context added to account for the particular quote being used. Secondly, it’s typically obvious (as it should be) that the text being cited is clearly conducive to the particular argument being made. For instance, the line “got no/papa-mummy” from Artaud’s “Here Lies” appears twice in Anti-Oedipus, both within the context of the unconscious being described “as an orphan” (14, 49).32

31 Koerner’s description is apt: “[We] constantly encounter unexpected interjections of quotations, names, and ideas lifted from other texts, lines that appear all of a sudden as though propelled by their own force. One might say they are deployed rather than explained or interpreted” (162).

32 Plus, we get the additional context of the “body without organs,” one of D&G’s main theoretical concepts, having originated with Artaud, who himself was schizophrenic.
Artaud, Beckett, Miller, Büchner—they’re all used liberally, intertextually, and it’s never unclear as to why.

But the lone line of Jackson’s that the authors are so fond of (mis)translating—“I may run, but all the time that I am, I’ll be looking for a stick!” (Soledad 328)—is never really contextualized. (I admonish my students for this sort of thing, incidentally: leaving “hit and run” quotes.) So, it would seem—and this may sound conspiratorial—that there’s more at play here than academic laziness or whimsy. There seems to be a concerted effort to avoid having us look too closely at Jackson’s texts through a “schizoanalytic” lens. So here we are.

We want to argue that D&G’s use of Jackson’s line reflects what we’re calling “contextual misrepresentation”: an attempt is being made to appropriate some of Jackson’s revolutionary bona fides without really considering whether or not his text is conducive to the theoretical and philosophical concepts being proffered. We will show that Jackson’s writing does in fact correspond to much of what D&G are arguing in both volumes of Capitalism and Schizophrenia, just not in the way that the authors imply. It’s clear by their use of Jackson that his text is, like the others, being held up as an example of “schizoid-revolutionary-nomadic” writing, when in reality, the opposite is true. Jackson’s text tends towards the molar instead of the molecular, the whole instead of the partial, interest instead of desire, exclusive instead of inclusive disjunctions, etc. Jackson represents what Foucault describes in his preface to Anti-Oedipus as a “sad militant”: someone whose interests may be aligned with the revolution on a molar level, but whose desires are reactionary—even fascist—on a molecular level. Someone who, despite all allusions to the contrary, remains oedipalized, a subject under capitalism, a neurotic. Not
a “docile body” in the Foucauldian sense, perhaps, but a subject whose microfascisms represent the “petty varieties” that “constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives” (AO xiv). All of this, of course, will require some serious unpacking. To be clear, when we say that Jackson is or is not schizophrenic, nomadic, neurotic, oedipalized, etc., we mean the Jackson-of-the-text(s) as viewed through a Deleuzoguattarian lens—not the historical, flesh-and-blood Jackson. Simply put, we’re going to “use” him in much that same way that D&G use all of their creative source material—we’re just going to do it in much greater depth. And diligently.

The “Autobiography”

George Jackson was by all accounts a petty criminal when he was sentenced to “one year to life” for allegedly robbing a gas station of seventy dollars. He studied Marxian philosophy behind bars and was considered something of a rabblerouser, galvanizing his fellow inmates to his cause and writing prolifically, garnering attention on both sides of the prison wall for his intellect as well as his radicalism. He was gunned down during what authorities claimed was an escape attempt—a Deleuzoguattarian “line of flight,” which, we intend to show, was largely doomed from the start. The first of his two books, Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson, has a curious publishing history. The editor, Greg Armstrong, managed to collect and curate a substantial amount of correspondence that Jackson had composed between 1964 and 1970, shortly before his death. The vast majority of the letters are addressed to family members, particularly Jackson’s father and mother, and hence we can assume that the handwritten letters were
channeled to Armstrong in tranches and then narrowed down: selected, typed, and, in some way, edited for publication.  

But in the end, the editor felt that the collection was incomplete, so he asked that the author submit an autobiographical sketch to serve as an introduction. What Jackson delivered, apparently under duress—“I probably didn’t work hard enough on this but I’m pressed for time—all the time” (3)—is fascinating: a fourteen-page screed documenting what he presumably regards as his most salient, character-defining moments. The young Jackson is portrayed as a hellion, unmanageable—in Deleuzoguattarian terms, “anoedipal.” He tells a story about his fascination with flight, how he once tied a tablecloth around his neck and attempted to leap off the roof of his housing project in Chicago: “[I’d] have leaped to my death, down among the garbage barrels, had [my sister] not grabbed me, tablecloth and all, and kicked my little ass” (5). Later, with the same sister, he would attempt to satisfy his desire by leaping from a public streetcar: “Each time Delora would hang on to me, trying to save me, but I was just too determined” (6). He claims to have nearly burned them both to death simply to experience a gas explosion: “She made a last brave effort to save me but I was too determined. I threw the matches across the last few feet. Delora shielded my eyes with her hand as the explosion went off” (7).  

This recurring theme of youthful determination, featured so prominently within a short space, is indicative of the free-flowing desire that D&G describe as “schizophrenic.” Whereas Freud describes the “id” as an uncompromising component of  

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33 There’s some debate as to the actual shaping of the book. At different points, Jackson and his mother accused Armstrong of “heavy editing” (Cummins 172). Jackson’s mother, for her part, was apparently appalled at her son’s braggadocious attitude toward his criminal past (depicted largely in the opening pages, composed at Armstrong’s request), whereas Jackson himself was more concerned with censorship generally. We can assume, though, that all of the letters were in fact written by Jackson.
the pleasure principle, D&G describe schizophrenia as a machinic process, not—and this is important—a medical condition. Essentially, the unconscious is a machine, a factory, one in which the “schizoid” process is highly productive as opposed to representative or theatrical. But modernity, we know, requires a docile subject (in the Foucauldian sense), and thus the schizophrenic process needs to be curtailed, not for the sake of society per se, but for the perpetuation of a particular “social formation”—in this case, capitalism.

What these early scenes represent is an anoedipalized, non-neurotic, schizophrenic youngster, completely unincumbered by social forces. But clearly uninhibited desire is dangerous: young George would surely have died had it not been for his older, oedipalized sister.

But then something very interesting happens in 1956, when Jackson is about thirteen. He describes a cross-country trip with his father to his adoptive home of Los Angeles, which culminated in his first potential, though aborted, brush with the law. The tale is worth transcribing in some detail:

I was certain that I could handle the standard gearshift and pedals. I asked him to let me try upon our arrival in Los Angeles that first day. He dismissed me with an “Ah—crazy nigger lay dead” look….He went off with [his cousin] to visit other relatives, I stayed behind with the keys and the car. I made one corner, down one street, waited for the traffic light, firmed my jaw, dry-swallowed—took off around the next corner, and ended the turn inside the plate-glass window and front door of the neighborhood barber shop. The brother who owned the shop allowed my father to do the repair work himself. No pigs were called to settle this affair between brothers. One showed up by chance, however. I had to answer a court
summons later that year. But the brother sensed that my father was poor, like himself, with a terribly mindless, displaced, irresponsible child on his hands, probably like his own, and didn’t insist upon having the gun-slinging pig from the outside enemy culture arbitrate the problems we must handle ourselves. My father fixed the brother’s shop with his own hands, after buying the materials….And he never said a word to me about it. I guess he was convinced by then that words wouldn’t help me. I’ve been a fool—often. (Soledad 11-12)

A fuller Deleuzoguattarian analysis of this scene will have to wait, but we can paint a rather crude picture in the following way. A pre-oedipalized, pre-stratified Jackson deterritorializes the family car and takes off on a line of flight, the road stretching out in front of him serving as the body without organs upon which his nascent subjecthood is being inscribed, via breaks (brakes) and flows, with every rotation of the wheel: free-flowing desire grinding up against “anti-production”—a somewhat metaphysical version of Althusser’s interpellation, perhaps, but not quite so subjectifying (we’re not there yet). The passive synthesis of connection (hand-machine/wheel-machine/foot-machine/gas-machine) gives way to the passive synthesis of disjunction (the plate-glass window, yet another encounter with the death instinct), and what gets yielded is a passive synthesis of conjunction: Jackson’s “becoming-criminal” accompanied by the illusion of sovereign subjectivity: “Oh, that was me!” Like we said before, some unpacking…

The Theoretical Framework

Before we can begin to read Jackson through a proper Deleuzoguattarian lens, we need to define some terms and get some of the theoretical concepts explicated. Both volumes of Capitalism and Schizophrenia are extremely dense, totaling nearly a thousand pages (not
to mention the authors’ other collaborations), so a summary is no easy task, but we can sum up the thesis for our needs in the following way. Capitalism joins together flows of labor and capital and submits them both to an “axiomatic,” which works by way of (decoded) abstract quantification and exchange. So, whereas with previous social formations (primitive, despotic) there were “codes,” which served as walls external to the system and could be breached only at great personal and uncompromisable peril, the axioms of capital are flexible; these walls are internal, thus everything from punk rock to politics gets compromised in one way or another. (Want to fuck a minor? Commit murder? There’s always a price.) Everything gets commodified, and in so doing, desire shifts: it now focuses on endless profit, production for the sake of production. Capitalism appears to be on the side of desire, liberating the codes, but there’s a catch: what’s actually being decoded (or deterritorialized) is a molar form of desire, not molecular. Because capitalism requires a subject, and because a subject is incompatible with decoded molecular desire, the “regimes” need to be separated “in a catastrophic fashion” (AO 337). Freud called this sublimation. To D&G, nothing is actually sublimated: “The truth is that sexuality is everywhere: the way a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a business man causes money to circulate; the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and so on” (ibid 293).

D&G argue that desiring-production (libido) and social production (labor) are identical in nature: both are machinic; both involve connective, disjunctive, and conjunctive syntheses and both include “anti-production” in the form of a body without organs or “socius.” All of this can be thought of, roughly, as Nietzsche’s will to power grafted onto Marx’s general formula of MCM’: untrammeled units of production
(connections) meet with forms of resistance (disjunctions) and begin to yield surplus value (conjunctions). It’s curious, D&G note, that Freud diagnosed the nature of libido during the same period that political economists diagnosed the nature of labor: “Freud discovers the subjective nature or abstract essence of desire, just as Ricardo discovers the subjective nature or abstract essence of labor, beyond all representations that would bind it to objects, to aims, or even to particular sources” (AO 300). It’s not that these things—desire and labor—had suddenly become eerily similar; it’s simply that through their abstraction, their privatization, their identical natures became clear for the first time.

People suddenly began to feel a “lack”—in terms of who they wished to fuck and what they wished to buy. Almost like a Woody Allen movie, suddenly everything becomes strikingly clear: “Oh, so that’s why I’m so messed up!”

Yet, as these similarities in nature became increasing clear, there emerged a stark difference in the “regimes” of labor and desire. Desiring-production is “molecular” in that it consists of flows, impulses, partial objects, etc. Social production is “molar” in that it accords with the law of large numbers; certain constants emerge in the aggregate, whole objects solidify, certain statistical regularities accrue: “Desiring-machines in one sense, but organic, technical, or social machines in the other: these are the same machines under determinate conditions” (AO 287). At an individual level, these molecules behave randomly, chaotically. At a molar level, they gain stability. The important point is this: the molecular and the molar (micro and macro) exist in a relationship of “double conditioning,” which is to say that they act upon each other recursively. This is very much in accord with Foucault and disciplinary societies. Even a liberal, “free” society requires subjects and subjugation. If not, everything would devolve into chaos.
Liberalism requires that subjects behave in such a way that conforms with the “axiomatics” of the social order. Thus, as free as things appear on a molar level, there’s something happening on the molecular level that is necessarily “reterritorialized,” or “oedipalized.”

The role of the nuclear family, then, is that of agents for capital: to produce neurotic, oedipalized subjects—in essence, to reroute molecular desire toward something that it lacks. But the benefit is this: a neurotic subject whose needs can never be met, whose desire can never be fully assuaged is, within a capitalist framework, entirely manageable. Thus, whereas the schizophrenic is ungovernable, the neurotic is, at the very least, pliable and commodifiable within the system. The subjectivity of desire: “So that’s what I wanted!”—even though this “want” is entirely manufactured. Not unlike Nietzsche’s unpayable debt: “That will for self-torture, that inverted cruelty of the animal man, who, turned subjective and scared into introspection” (EN 264). The subject who willingly represses his own desire is the ideal subject under capitalism: docile, guilty, compliant, all-consuming.

Desire, at the molecular level, is revolutionary. And revolution itself is a matter of desire before it is a matter of interest. “Becoming-revolutionary” is a process carried out by revolutionary subjects, not neurotic or oedipalized ones. Desire has to be disentangled from groups or group interest. Subjects and subject-groups (or subjugated groups) have interests that may be revolutionary or reactionary in the desires that accompany them. Interests could be left wing or right wing, reactionary or revolutionary, but in the end, it’s all about revolutionary, molecular desire—which, under “determinate conditions” could be reprogrammed to harbor Nietzschean ressentiment. Simply put, interest could be
revolutionary while desire could be reactionary. This is what Foucault means in his preface to *Anti-Oedipus* when he describes the “sad militant.” One could be a molar revolutionary while simultaneously being a ressentiment-harboring subject: a molecular reactionary or microfascist. As D&G themselves describe, the situation is entirely “muddled”: “[W]hat appears to other people as raw desire still contains complexes of desire and interest, a mixture of forms of desire and of interest that are specifically reactionary and vaguely revolutionary” (*AO* 350). Had D&G read Jackson’s texts carefully (I’m convinced they did not), they’d have concluded that this is clearly where Jackson belongs: the domain of the “muddled.” At best. For all his revolutionary bluster, Jackson, we believe, remains “stratified” to the point of disqualification in terms of such brazen (and repeated) appropriation by D&G. This brings us back to that seminal moment, the oedipalizing “line of flight” depicted so neatly in that car crash scene. Perhaps we’re better positioned now to examine it in greater detail, for things get even more complex when we move from *Anti-Oedipus* to *A Thousand Plateaus* (nothing is ever “abstract enough” for D&G, hence all the new categories, subcategories, neologisms that appear in volume two).

Deterritorialization is what happens when a multiplicity (boy, car, keys, road) is recoded with a different set of functions than it had originally been coded with to fit a certain framework (a hand is a de-territorialized claw or paw, for instance, reterritorialized to grasp whereas before it was coded to scratch or climb). The deterritorialization process, then, is a pivot or rupture that creates new lines of flight (or segmentarity) that break off from an oppressive, over-coding regime of one kind or another: “He dismissed me with an ‘Ah—crazy nigger lay dead look.’” The body without
organs can be thought of as a field of intensities or potentialities upon which multiplicities appear as organs: “I made one corner, down one street, waited for a traffic light, firmed my jaw, dry-swallowed—took off around the next corner, and ended the turn inside the plate-glass window and front door of the neighborhood barber shop.” The organs then link together to form a plane of organization (molar level), as opposed to the plane of consistency (molecular level, which can be thought of as comprising all of the bodies without organs).

Thus, while the entire scene is taking place in “reality,” the molecularities (the boy’s desiring-machines) are firing rapidly while extensive “strata” is accumulating on the plane of organization: the boy is “becoming” something. Strata, according to D&G, are entities which capture flows, singularities, particles, and code them, territorialize them. Thus, the plane of organization is comprised of strata that behave as “apparatuses of capture,” wrangling otherwise chaotic and desultory flows and coding them according to a particular “sign regime”: “The brother who owned the shop allowed my father to do the repair work himself. No pigs were called to settle this affair between brothers.” The settling of the matter privately could only occur within this particular sign regime, which is organized by an “abstract machine” operating in the background: a particular way of organizing content (bodies) and modes of expression (“the brother” vs. “the gun-slinging pig”).

Semiotic sign regimes are always mixed, though, never pure. What’s important for our purposes is that the capitalist machine corresponds to a mixture of the “signifying” and “post-signifying” regimes, the ones that D&G devote the majority of space to in A Thousand Plateaus. In the signifying regime, everything revolves around
the despot (the father-god); and in the post-signifying regime, everything revolves around subjectification and emotion (the boy’s “becoming” or “stratification”). The blending of these regimes is organized by what D&G refer to the “abstract machine of faciality,” which establishes subjectivity based on one’s particular “face”—its deviance from the norm (the white face of Christ): “Racism operates by the determination of degrees from deviance in relation to the White-Man face, which endeavors to integrate nonconforming traits into increasingly eccentric and backward waves, sometimes tolerating them at given places under given conditions” (ATP 178).34 Thus, we have an amalgam of paranoia and intense emotion (which essentially encapsulates our epoch), characterized by “arborescences or dichotomies” (brother/pig, black/white). “It is precisely because the face depends on an abstract machine that it does not assume a pre-existing subject or signifier; but it is subjacent to them and provides the substance necessary to them” (ibid 179). The subject emerges in the mix, through a mutual betrayal, a “double turning-away,” of faciality coupled with the escape into becoming: “Faciality undergoes a profound transformation. The god [father] averts his face…and the subject, gripped by a veritable fear of the god, averts his or her face in turn….It is this double turning away that draws the positive line of flight” (ATP 123).

Interesting, then, that Jackson ends this pivotal scene with just such an aversion. His father, we recall, convinces the shop owner to keep it between them, that he’ll pay for the damage and fix it all personally. And then the coda: “And he never said a word to me about it. I guess he was convinced by then that words wouldn’t help me. I’ve been a fool—often.” The father-god averts his face (I’m done with you, you’re incorrigible).

34 Note the similarity to Foucault’s concept of “normalizing judgement”: “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes” (DP 183).
And the subtle reciprocation: “I’ve been a fool—often.” Note the shift to the present perfect continuous tense. Thus, the son averts his face in perpetuum, completing the “double turning away.” The subject is inaugurated, off he goes on his “positive” line of flight—for at this point, anything could happen, good or bad. One can hardly begrudge Jackson his dichotomies, his exclusive disjunctions: imagine how differently things might have gone had the shop owner been white. On the other hand, had Jackson been punished at this still impressionable age (had his father not averted his face) it’s not hard to imagine a different outcome. Perhaps Jackson would have simply become a docile subject, a workaday proletarian like his dad.

The Letters, the Literature, and What They Reveal

So, what is it that Oedipus does, exactly? It neutralizes desire, it “organizes” the machines, it streamlines multiplicities—it “presupposes a fantastic repression of desiring-machines” (AO 9). Simply put, it reduces everything to “mommy-daddy-me.” In order to function in society, there has to be some give and take between desiring-machines and the body without organs: our urges to connect and the resistances we meet. There must be breaks in the flows, inscriptions upon the body, so that difference can assert itself, for difference is required to maintain a system because only when a system has the capacity to adapt to change—when it can recognize and appreciate new machines and incorporate them, as with an inoculation—can it maintain effectively. “Conforming to the meaning of the word ‘process,’ recording falls back on (se rabat sur) production, but the production of recording is followed by consumption, but the production of consumption is produced through the production of recording. This is because something on the order of a subject

35 This is confirmed, incidentally, in Armstrong’s own memoir, The Dragon Has Come, which documents extended interviews with Jackson: “So I rejected [my father] and he rejected me” (38-9).
can be discerned on the recording surface (AO 16). What this means, essentially, is that one’s subject position, or identity, is always already “discerned” by the interplay between the desiring-machines and the body without organs, the uninhibited flows and the “anti-production” which, in capturing them, attempts to control them.

Thus, when we look at some of the examples that D&G provide, depicting the way in which certain authors allow desiring-machines to flow freely, we can readily see how much they differ from ordinary, “oedipalized” literature. Anti-Oedipus opens with a series of such depictions, demonstrating both the dynamism of the machines and their function as matrices of the unconscious. The following is a quote from Büchner’s Lenz, which D&G cite on page two: “He thought that it must be a feeling of endless bliss to be in contact with the profound life of every form, to have a soul for rocks, metals, water, and plants, to take into himself, as in a dream, every element of nature.” Further down we get a quote from Beckett’s Molloy: “What a rest to speak of bicyles and horns. Unfortunately it is not one of them I have to speak, but of her who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct.” (2-3). Later, we get some philosophy on love from D.H. Lawrence: “We have pushed process into a goal. The aim of any process is not the perpetuation of that process, but the completion thereof….The process should work to a completion, not to some horror of intensification, and extremity wherein the soul and body ultimately perish” (5).

For D&G, the sort of “schizophrenic” language depicted in the first two excerpts is extremely liberating in that it ignores both linguistic boundaries and genre conventions.

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36 Marx’s influence can be felt here: “The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange, and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity” (Grundrisse 99). The important point is, again, the recursiveness of the process, the stratification of the subject through the opposition between productive flows and the nonproductive body without organs.
The narration here is delusional, hallucinatory and desultory precisely because it has no *agenda*. Everything is dependent upon the flows, none of which succumb to coding. A particularly incoherent line or phrase may be followed by a more conventional one; everything is contingent, nothing is contrived. The language is revolutionary, not in terms of overthrowing the molar, but in de-filtering the molecular, letting it go, replicating “not at all any one specific aspect of nature, but nature as a process of production” (*AO* 3).

Lawrence’s more conventional insights are “nomadic” in that they focus specifically on the notion of process, and how all of this emphasis on end-product—our stratified lives—is doing us a disservice, hindering our happiness.

Nomadic or schizophrenic language does not abide boundaries or conventions; it resists territorialization (same as capital). The language doesn’t need to represent “reality”; it simply establishes connections, encounters disjunctions, and accepts consummations. Most importantly, it escapes the mommy-daddy-me trichotomy. We don’t get this sort of thing with Jackson, though; with Jackson, we get a much more conventional depiction of oedipalized thought and language. The autobiographical sketch which opens the book, though oedipally rich in its own right, is mild compared to what follows. In fact, the bulk of *Soledad Brother* is comprised of letters to his parents, and here the oedipalizing influence—ever since that initial (failed) line of flight through the storefront façade—is on full display. Jackson admits, in reference to his siblings, to being “the only one to get *special* protection from [his] mother” (8, his emphasis), which corresponds to interviews recorded by his editor, wherein he discusses how his father had been largely absent and hence his mother had to “take over the running of the family”
Jackson once confessed to his editor that his mother “said that she wanted to trap him in her womb” (ibid 112).

Unsurprisingly, symptoms of his enduring oedipalization run through the whole of *Soledad*. In one letter to his father, Jackson blames both parents for his incarceration:

“I would not be in prison now if she hadn’t been reading life through those rose-colored glasses of hers, or if you would have had time and the wisdom to tell me of my enemies, and how to get the things I needed without falling into their traps. She kept telling me how wrong I was and making me feel guilty” (42). Jackson chastises his father repeatedly, at times taking it to Kafkaesque (see below) proportions: “I have always respected and loved you people, and hated myself, cried bitter tears of remorse, when, because of circumstances and conditions, which I didn’t understand, I let you down” (65).

Earlier in this same letter, Jackson refers cryptically to a letter that his father had sent to prison authorities: “You didn’t think they would inform me of it, did you? But you are in serious error. They let me read it” (ibid). For elucidation on this, one must look to the interviews that Armstrong conducted with Jackson for his own book: “[M]y father went home and wrote a long letter to the institution and told them I needed psychiatric help and was bent on violent self-destruction. The bulls were passing the letter around, laughing at me” (85). Imagine that, Jackson’s father imploring prison officials to employ psychiatrists to “fix” his broken son. Jackson himself can see the absurdity in this: he blames his father for the betrayal, but not the sentiment, for he realizes how hopelessly misguided his father truly is. Jackson diagnoses the problem fairly well, yet fails on the solution: it’s not (molar) capitalism per se, but the misfiring flows of desire—the molecular makes the molar:
The major line ends at the body without organs, and there it either passes through the wall, opening onto the molecular elements where it becomes in actual fact what it was from the start: the schizophrenic process, the pure schizophrenic process of deterritorialization. Or it strikes the wall, rebounds off it, and falls back into the most miserably arranged territorialities of the modern world as simulacra of the proceeding planes….\textit{(AO 283)}

Granted, the body without organs is a scary thing to fall back on. Most of us will only go so far. Jackson’s mother had “fallen back on” religion and his father had fallen back on the state. Jackson himself, though he demonstrates acuity as to the nature of capital, had fallen back on grand narratives about race and teleological dialectics. None of them could circumvent the molar aggregates long enough to confront the real problem: “All molar functionalism is false…” (ibid 288). Representations paper over desire. Before we know it, we’re living in a simulation.

In Kafka’s famous “Letter to the Father,” which D&G analyze in their study on the author (and which bears some similarities to Jackson’s writing), we glimpse what D&G interpret as an almost parodic exemplification of oedipal neurosis. The father’s despotism is expanded to include every authority figure with whom the subject has had to contend. The adversarial universe is conveniently collapsed into a single, “global” object: “The judges, commissioners, bureaucrats, and so on, are not substitutes for the father; rather, it is the father who is a condensation of all these forces that he submits to and that he tries to get his son to submit to” \textit{(Kafka 12)}. Ever since that initial line of flight that ended on the wrong side of a plate-glass window, Jackson has remained trapped in an oedipal hellscape, not entirely of his own making, but one in which he had always been
complicit. “I have surrendered all hope of happiness,” he claims at one point, and later: “I didn’t create this impasse….I am [a] victim” (Soledad 86, 127).

The projection, the guilt, the ressentiment—a combo custom-made for modernity, the Freudian/Nietzschean subject *par excellence*. “There are three ways,” Jackson argues, “to enforce and build discipline in a child: through terror, through guilt, and through fear” (ibid 128). Sounds eerily like one of D&G’s central theses concerning social formations, how there are always distinct, yet overlapping, modes of repression: “[Capitalism] is no longer the age of cruelty or the age of terror, but the age of cynicism, accompanied by a strange piety” (AO 225). Jackson is certainly cynical, and at various points he curses his catholic school upbringing, blaming his mother for forcing it on him, blaming his father for everything else, and even blaming God for averting His gaze. He complains in a letter to his mother, “Robert gave me nothing. You gave me god and that horrible church. Even god managed to take something away from me” (Soledad 88). The ambiguity of that “something” seems salient, as though Jackson is vaguely aware that his desire had somehow been duped, made receptive to all that terror, guilt, and fear. D&G warn us in *A Thousand Plateaus* that “Every time desire is betrayed, cursed, uprooted from its field of immanence, a priest is behind it” (154). The sheer amount of oedipalized neuroticism that comes through in these pages would have been fairly obvious to any theoretician whose thesis relies so heavily upon criticizing Freud; funny that D&G, in making use of Jackson, make no mention of it whatsoever.

One of Jackson’s primary molarities is reflected in his fierce alignment with identity politics, his segregations, his exclusive disjunctions. To commit to an identity is to embrace the “arborescent,” to allow oneself to be captured, coded, and categorized to
the benefit of the social order. It would have made much more sense, in Jackson’s case, to “become-minor,” to elude the state entirely, to stay off the grid, to remain “rhizomatic.” To D&G, any sort of “becoming” (becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-imperceptible) always involves a successful line of flight away from the molar and into the molecular. It’s not an imitation or an evolution, but what D&G call an “involution”: “Becoming is involutionary, involution is creative. To regress is to move in the direction of something less differentiated. But to involve is to form a block that runs its own line ‘between’ the terms in play and beneath assignable relations” (ATP 239).

This is one of D&G’s more Nietzschean concepts, reminiscent of his famous “lightning-flashes” critique whereby the presumed separation is demystified; there can be no isolating the doer from the deed: “[T]here is no ‘being’ behind doing, working, becoming; ‘the doer’ is a mere appanage to the action” (EN 224). One recurring example of which D&G are fond is the “becoming-orchid” of the wasp and the “becoming-wasp” of the orchid, whereby both are engaged in a mutual deterritorialization: the orchid and the wasp “cross-pollinating” each other, the latter quite literally. Together they form a “rhizome”: “There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying” (ATP 10).

The problem with Jackson is that he remains within a molar “subjugated group” signified by a set of largely homogeneous representations: “Oedipus also flourishes in subjugated groups, where an established order is invested through the group’s repressive forms” (AO 103). Note that D&G don’t differentiate here between majority and minority groups; again, the subjugation is molecular, but it leads to an “illegitimate” commitment
to membership, molarity, *representable* identity. One needn’t read D&G too closely to see how anathema this is to their preferred mode of becoming: “Yes, I have been my father and I have been my son. ‘I, Antonin Artaud, am my son, my father, my mother, myself’” (*AO* 15). Nietzsche reminds us that every name in history is “I”—there’s nothing special about it. “There is no Nietzsche-the-self, professor of philology,” D&G claim, “rather there is the Nietzschean subject who passes through a series of states….A residual subject of the machine” (*AO* 21). See, Jackson doesn’t realize that his subjectivity is merely the residuum of the interplay between desiring-machines (or the plane of immanence) and the body without organs; he considers himself global, immutable: “I am what I am, and that’s all I am” (*Soledad* 71).

It might help to review the concept of the passive syntheses of the unconscious and how they function. There are always connections: a baby’s mouth to the mother’s breast, a child’s hand to a toy, a teenager’s eyes to a screen, etc. These connections can be said to be “legitimate” so long as nothing is “extrapolated” from them, which is to say that they shouldn’t be regarded as meaningful or representational: “[I]t must not be viewed as a goal or an end in itself, nor must it be confused with an infinite perpetuation of itself” (*AO* 5). Connections give way to disjunctions, which, when used legitimately, are perfectly fine: if the breast were eternally satisfying then there’d never be a need for baby food, toddler food, exotic foods, etc. Breaks in the flows are not only natural but necessary lest we never experience anything new, never move on in life: “[A]t the very heart of this production, within the very production of this production, the body suffers from being organized in this way, from not having some other sort of organization, or no
organization at all” (ibid 8). Whether we’re talking about pistons sputtering or neurons firing, all machines function in effect by “breaking down.”

Enter the body without organs, or “anti-production,” or what Freud would call the “death instinct.” (D&G prefer anti-production to the death instinct for reasons that should be obvious enough by now: death, or merely the stoppage of production past its prime, is simply one machine among many; it shouldn’t be regarded as a negative thing.\(^{37}\)) All this really means is that we move on, for better or worse. Through the interplay of these connections and disjunctions (through them and between them), we experience conjunction or consummation, which is always retroactive: “a conjunctive synthesis of consummation in the form of a wonderstruck ‘So that’s what it was!’” (ibid 17-18). If we’re not careful with this, though, it can lead to the illusion of “sovereign subjectivity,” whereby, let’s say, the son of a wealthy real estate magnate starts his own construction company with a loan from daddy, parlays his brash personality into a lucrative television contract, realizes his political aspirations, consolidates his power, and then spends the rest of his life claiming to have done it all by himself. This would be an “illegitimate” use of the passive synthesis of conjunction, the ramifications of which can be wide-ranging.

Now, in the earliest pages of Soledad Brother, which we’ve covered, the young Jackson is making seemingly “schizoid” connections: the hand-matches machine meets the gas-fumes machine, the boy-books machine jumps off the streetcar machine, the boy-cape machine attempts to leap off the roof-machine, and so forth. The death instinct is on full display. In each case, the synthesis of disjunction records these connections, but not

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\(^{37}\) Deleuze did end his “machinic life” when his lung disease became too unbearable for him. While we shouldn’t champion suicide by any means, his decision arguably speaks to his integrity, a faithfulness to his philosophy. The same cannot be said for someone like Ayn Rand, who, near the end of her life, opted to collect social security.
in the way that D&G would prefer. Instead of simply inspiring the desire for newer (perhaps safer) connections, Jackson remains, and reemerges, “determined.” He is correct in a sense: he is the residuum of these unconscious syntheses—he is in effect “determined” by them, but the problem is that in declaring himself “determined,” he reveals his insatiable yearning for acquisition: “we pass from detachable partial objects to the detached complete object, from which global persons derive by an assigning of lack” (AO 73, their emphasis).

Simply put, Jackson always feels as though something is missing. He’s determined to fill a void: the undergirding motor of capitalism, for which Oedipus acts as a sort of sales agent. D&G make it clear from the early pages of Anti-Oedipus that this is the overarching problem: “From the moment that we place desire on the side of acquisition, we make desire an idealistic (dialectical, nihilistic) conception, which causes us to look upon it primarily as a lack: a lack of an object, a lack of the real object” (25). Jackson’s yearning for some sort of spiritual and/or material wholeness comes through particularly when it comes to his father: “How do you think I felt,” he writes, “when I saw you come home each day a little more depressed than the day before? How do you think I felt when I looked in your face and saw the clouds forming, when I saw you look around and see your best efforts go for nothing—nothing” (Soledad 68). But the key point is this: there’s no difference in the repetition, simply the same retroactive “determination” to fill a void. This is the first indication that the use of the passive syntheses is illegitimate (oedipalized), but we want to suggest that it’s not until Jackson goes through the plate-glass window that something on the order of a lasting subjectivity

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38 Interestingly, Jackson often omits the question mark altogether. One assumes that this was his habit and that his editor was simply being faithful to the transcription process, but it is telling: with Jackson, everything is rhetorical.
blossoms, what we’re calling his “becoming-criminal.” In this respect, we can at least discern an orchid to his wasp: “I had to answer a court summons later that year.” From this moment on, Jackson had formed a rhizome with the criminal justice system: a Nietzschean labyrinth from which he would never emerge. The cops, the judges, the warden—his father serving as a “condensation of all these forces.” The double turning away, both subjects living under the oedipalized impression that their subjectivities are exclusively their own: “It’s me, and so it’s mine…” (AO 16).

Jackson’s prison experience seems only to have solidified his “rigid segmentarity” as described by D&G: “In the rigid mode, binary segmentarity stands on its own and is governed by great machines of direct binarization” (ATP 212). The more molar or “binarized” the machines are, the more resistant they are to change or destratification. What follows is a small sample from Soledad: “Women like to be dominated” (125). “[The Chinese] understand the need and power of ethnic solidarity” (161, his emphasis). “[T]here are only two types of people inhabiting my closet, friends and foes” (215). “We [blacks] are going to have to be the vanguard” (283). “At least three [cons] are outright homosexuals” (305). Should it strike us as surprising that an oppressed person of color, who’d come of age during Jim Crow, might harbor some narrowness of mind? Probably not. We should cut him some slack, but in the context of “binarization” being, for D&G, a major molar hindrance on the path toward destratification, we shouldn’t ignore it either. D&G state unequivocally that “a disjunction that remains disjunctive, and still affirms the disjoined terms…without restricting one by the other or excluding the other from the one, is perhaps the greatest paradox” (AO 76, their emphasis). Exclusive disjunctions lead inevitably to the “segregative use of the conjunctive syntheses of the
unconscious…[which] is an incomparable weapon in the service of the dominating class” (ibid 103). In other words, all of this is bad—antithetical, not only to destratification (and hence de-oedipalizing the neuroticized subject) but to Jackson’s revolutionary aspirations writ large. For all his “Power to the People” rhetoric (his standard valediction for letters to comrades), Jackson fiercely defends his maleness, his heterosexuality, his ethnicity—his molarity. Though he prefers not to think of himself this way, Jackson remains “segmented” within the system, navigating the “straited space” on the plane of organization, hoping for a line of flight, but creeping toward a line of death. Unfortunate for sure, but not too surprising under the circumstances. He was, after all, literally segmented.39

Nor should we be surprised that a young man who’d been locked away since the age of eighteen (he was twenty-nine when he died) is experiencing issues with libidinal flow, the specific energy of desiring-machines. At our most basic level, we belong to the molecular order, which allows for “cosmic change,” which, D&G argue, is foundational if any real change is to occur. All the restriction and reduction we’re pointing out is detectable on the molar level, which “falls back upon” (se rabat sur) libido, inhibiting the flows and inculcating a discord between molecular libido and molar labor. It is precisely this difference between molecular desire and molar interest that D&G spend so much of their corpus unpacking. There are many ways of describing it—rhizomatic vs. arborescent; supple vs. rigid; smooth vs. striated; intensive vs. extensive—but it always comes down to the same basic idea: that one cannot be fooled unless on some level one desires to be fooled (which is why D&G dismiss the concept of “ideology”). Fascism,

39 For being a supposed threat to the repressive state apparatus, Jackson spent the better part of his prison time in “seg”—segregation, prison within prison.
D&G argue, is the desire for desire’s own repression, or as Foucault puts it, “The fascism in us all” (AO xiii). Capitalism engenders schizophrenia, which constantly threatens to overthrow the system, unless the flows are in some way reterritorialized (axiomatized). Hence the need for “manageable neurotics.” Thus, D&G do not deny the existence of lack; they simply deny its primordiality. “The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the art of a dominant class” (AO 28). It’s that capitalistic engine—the deliberate construct of precarity—that compelled Jackson’s father to uproot his family to Los Angeles from Chicago in search of a better life. And it was those same capital flows, that same lure, that swept young George into that gas station, gun in hand, and ultimately to prison for the rest of his life. Desire rewired to correspond to lack, the bedrock of a capitalist economy.

The main issue with Jackson is that he clearly considers it his “duty” to lead the vanguard, to overthrow capitalism: “I am charged to right the wrong, lift the burden from the backs of future generations. I will not shrink from my duties” (Soledad 70). He laments that he would “grow old feeling that [he] had failed in the obligatory duty that is ours once we become aware” (ibid 146, my emphasis). Jackson sees himself as having “come to consciousness” as a result of his Marxist education; but this, D&G argue, is precisely the problem:

Revolutionaries often forget, or do not like to recognize, that one wants and makes revolution out of desire, not duty. Here as elsewhere, the concept of ideology is an execrable concept that hides the real problems, which are always of an organizational nature….There is an unconscious libidinal investment of desire that does not necessarily coincide with the preconscious investments of interest,
and that explains how the latter can be perturbed and perverted “in the most somber organization,” below all ideology. (*AO* 344-5)

They couldn’t be clearer if they were responding to Jackson’s own texts. At the risk of seeming pedantic (or just plain silly), we’ve done some accounting: the rate at which Jackson uses the word “interest” in *Soledad Brother* is roughly six times that of his use of “desire.”

One can argue with some merit that this is clearly arbitrary and comes down to nothing more than semantics. Fair enough. But if we look at the texts, Jackson’s use of these words matches D&G’s description of them almost to a T: “I discovered the true interest of my ills, when I found that this social order had created, through its inadequacies and its abandonment of our interest, the basis for my frustrations” (*Soledad* 65-6, my emphasis). “Because my mind is still my own, no one can lie to me anymore. I know where my interest lies” (ibid 76, my emphasis). Exactly, he knows on the molar level where the “interests” are concerned, what the “social order” has done: he’s conscious of these things—that’s the problem. And when he does use the word “desire,” he connotes it with oedipal implications: “Though you may not see much evidence of it,” he writes to his sister, “Robert still harbors the desire to be a man and assert himself” (ibid 136). Fixated on the father, of course (smacks of projection, no?). This is the issue.

Jackson’s preconscious interests are clearly out of sync with his unconscious libido:

What is reactionary or revolutionary in the preconscious investment of interest does not necessarily coincide with what is reactionary or revolutionary in the unconscious libidinal investment. A revolutionary preconscious investment bears upon new aims, new social syntheses, a new power. But it could be that a part at

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40 The rate of 6:1 has been adjusted for contextual meaning (money interest, for example, would not count).
least of the unconscious libido continues to invest the former body, the old form
of power, its codes, and its flows. (AO 347)

Echoing Foucault’s preface to Anti-Oedipus, D&G address, in A Thousand
Plateaus, the problem of leftists “secreting microfascisms”: “It’s too easy to be antifascist
on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain
and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective” (215). What we’re
saying is that while Jackson may be a revolutionary in the molar, organizational sense, he
remains a molecular reactionary—or even worse, a fascist. Surely, he would reject such a
label with every fiber of his being (every molar fiber), but Guattari accounts for this type
of dissonance in his solo work, Molecular Revolution. In it, he warns against the
mishandling of Marxist precepts, filtering them through mediations, flattening difference,
and homogenizing the masses:

In fact, it is no accident that this neo-Marxist method of thought is swamped in
bureaucratic practices; this owing to the fact that it has never really disengaged its
pseudo-dialectic from an obdurate dualism between representation and reality,
between the caste who hold the passwords and the masses, who are heard
alphabetizing and catechizing like good children. (89)

Purported revolutionaries, aiming to overthrow capitalism by force, a form of fascism,
the glimmers of which are all throughout Jackson’s work, particularly his polemical text,
Blood in My Eye: “If people are to understand and relate to revolutionary violence they
must first be educated into an acceptance of the fact that there is no alternative” (14).
Sounds somewhat threatening. He continues: “The whole question is, just what level of
consciousness will support the violent revolutionary activity necessary to achieve our
ends?” (ibid). Note that D&G prefer the term “preconscious” because it allows someone like Jackson the benefit of the doubt; he’s clearly not as “conscious” as he thinks he is, and what they refer to as the “old form of power, it’s codes, and it’s flows” is reflective of the reactionary’s false sense of revolutionary duty. The rhetoric we find in *Soledad Brother* is tame, actually, compared to the reactionary bluster we find in the second work: “If we accept revolution, we must accept all that it implies: repression, counter-terrorism, days filled with work, nervous strain, prison, funerals” (*Blood* 41). Or this: “The objective, I repeat, of the destruction of a city-based industrial establishment and its protective forces is to create perfect disorder” (ibid 62). We might not begrudge Jackson his “vulgar” Marxism, his Fanonism sans nuance. (How much Mao, Lenin, and Che can one consume before beginning to think like a tyrant?) After all, Jackson lived in a 1960s maximum security prison, in segregation: his resources were limited. Had he gotten his hands on some Gramsci, some early Althusser, who knows? *Anti-Oedipus* would probably have blown his mind.

**Conclusion**

In the final analysis, the schizophrenic process is a threat to capitalism not because the proletariat will come to consciousness, but because if libidinal flows were both decoded and de-axiomatized, they would be able to bypass the basic demands and requirements that define the social order. Hierarchies would simply collapse; untrammeled desire would never abide them. Debts would go unpaid; there’d be no subjects guilty enough to

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41 There’s reason to believe that Jackson’s interests were not only superficial, but that his “research” was cursory. The following is among Armstrong’s transcribed interviews with him: “That was about the time that George Lewis gave me this book, *The Communist Manifesto*, and after that I waded through...struggled through...*Anti-Duehring*. But I think the thing that really put us on, put me on, is the thing that it shakes these cats up so. I just concluded that anything that they were against, I was for it” (182).
honor them. We’d surpass the limit, breach “the wall”: no more neuroticisms, and hence no more petty weaknesses, no more manufactured lacks for the market to exploit.

Readers of *Anti-Oedipus* might recall some oft-quoted text near the middle of it—some lines that seem to have struck a chord with “accelerationists,” who believe that we should push capitalism along toward its inevitable demise. “For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to ‘accelerate the process,’ as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven’t seen anything yet” (239-40). But the emphasis here is in on deterritorialization at the molecular level: capitalism already deterritorializes and decodes at the molar level (which is sort of the whole point). Thus, D&G are not saying that we should push capitalism *further*, but that we must de-oedipalize the subject at its core: the only workable path, as they see it, through the wall. Thus, Jackson was never really much of a threat.42 His final line of flight ended predictably, “*turning to destruction, abolition pure and simple….* [A] way out that turns the line of flight into a line of death” (*ATP* 229, their emphasis). Had he scaled the prison wall, as planned, and made it underground, he might have been able to create some local disturbances, some low-level chaos, but that likely would have been it. Some people may have gotten hurt, perhaps even killed. But it’s folly to think that he’d have done any serious damage to the system, let alone topple capitalism. On a conscious level, we’re all “interested” in some sort of change. But first we must welcome change on a libidinal level. We must *desire* change.

42 By the way, do I really believe in a “concerted effort to avoid having us look too closely at Jackson’s texts through a ‘shizoanalytic’ lens”? Not really. Apparently, the particular quote that D&G kept using was cribbed from a pamphlet put out by the GIP (Information Group on Prisons), with which Deleuze was affiliated. Probably the only line of Jackson’s he’d ever read. The rest is likely just a lack of effort on the part of editors and publishers.
*Little fish catches the big fish.* – I was taken all the way across town to San Vicente, which struck me as odd. It hadn’t occurred to me that I’d been roused by the sheriffs, who were headquartered out of West Hollywood, and not the LAPD. The station looked more like a library: beige-bricked and diminutive with manicured shrubbery, a cordoned-off garden, even an Art Deco piece out front. It was a far cry from the downtown lockup. There was no crowd, no cold metal or gray concrete, no shackle clanks or caterwauls. I was the only one being booked, and inmate reception at the West Hollywood Sheriff’s Station was more like a hotel check-in. There was a large wooden desk with a receptionist, plants, padded benches, stone walls. In another context, it might’ve been cozy.

After all the ritualistic fingerprinting and photo-taking, I was placed in a small holding room abutting the lobby. Once inside, the wall behind me consisted mainly of the door I’d just entered. The opposite wall was fitted with tempered glass, an aluminum frame, and a dated speak-thru: the kind of transaction window you’d encounter at a cheap motel. The space couldn’t have been more than six by eight feet, and the stark white walls and large bricks reminded me of grade school. It felt nice, though, to be un-cuffed and unattended. I paced the two or three allowable steps. Beltless, my jeans sagged and my shoes flopped from lack of laces. How willful one would have to be, I thought, to hang in such a place; there was nowhere to suspend from. The only thing resembling a source of comfort was the narrow metal bench bolted to the wall, so I sat. It was cold. I decided to see how comfortable I could get, so I zipped up my hoodie and covered my head and curled up on my side. With my knees slightly bent, I was just stable enough to keep from falling.
Time was hard to gauge. Hours had gone by. Then the door unlocked and opened, startling me. I glanced up just in time to see the sack lunch and milk carton being placed on the floor. The door closed quickly and relocked. (Was I an animal? Might I have lunged?) I sat up, reached for the bag and tore open the plastic. It was the familiar beige bread with bologna, a mustard packet, cookies, and an apple. The beverage was the same cranberry cocktail drink I’d gotten downtown.

I began assembling the sandwich, remembering only now that I hadn’t eaten all day. The bologna tasted good, like a hot dog (probably the mustard). A scruffy-looking plainclothes approached the window and leaned into the speak-thru. “The lead detective is ready for you,” he said. I stopped the sandwich an inch or two from my mouth. Why, I asked, would I want to talk to a detective? “You know,” he said. “Little fish catches the big fish.” And he made a looping motion with his finger, as if the linkage would’ve been otherwise hard to grasp. I reminded him that I hadn’t been read my rights, nor had I been formally charged. His retort amounted to a formless riff on “Mirandizing” and the vague necessity thereof, which I found belittling. He seemed to be saying that I watch too much TV. I asked him what he was offering. “You agree to work with us and we’ll let you out tonight,” he said. “Start by giving us the names of three people who carry more dope than you, and then you cooperate. Should be easy for you, it’s not a lot of dope.”

His nerdy use of the word “dope” amused me slightly. But he was revealing that they hadn’t found much at my place, which made sense. A few days prior to this, Keith had brokered a deal with Jonah, his pot dealer, who sold coke occasionally, and I had okayed an ounce all at once. So, I knew that I was low on coke; I just didn’t know how
low. Whatever remained constituted the evidence against me. But I ignored the cop, and he left.
THEODORE ADORNO’S *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, a series of aphorisms in the Nietzschean style, can be loosely described as an advice book: how to live the “good life” within a society that engenders damaged ones. It might be read more broadly, though, as a critique of progress in modernity. Over the course of the book, Adorno takes swipes at both the left and the right, but always in the context of the diminishing individual: the contradiction being that, according to proponents of positivism and classical liberalism, a harmonious whole will somehow develop out of a society consisting of self-interested actors. How can one truly succeed on an individual level when conditions for survival are predicated upon competition and conformism—some malignant form of what we call “normality”? Adorno’s aphorisms are individually titled, often in some cute, clichéd, or ironic fashion. In one called *Cat out of the bag*, he divulges what he believes to be the “sickness” inherent in the socialist ideal, how even something as innocuous-seeming as unanimity can be corrupted for personal gain.

“Solidarity,” Adorno argues, “is polarized into the desperate loyalty of those who have no way back, and virtual blackmail practiced by those who want nothing to do with jailers” (55). The corrupt in “solidarity” with the desperate. Not the unlikeliest of bedfellows when one thinks about it.

Such cynicism can be contextualized within a larger framework involving groupthink and the romantic idea that one is “swimming with the tide of history.” *We’re
all in this together, thus we sacrifice now for the sake of the future, the greater good.

However, in a war of competing ideologies, “one knows dimly that in the end the leaders on both sides will come to terms on the backs of those yoked beneath them” (ibid). This ugly inevitability occurs on levels both micro and macro, according to Adorno, from union leaders dealing with management to Hitler’s deal with Stalin: all predicated on the continual sacrifice from those who can least afford it. A false sense of security paid for by a permanence of fear—or, more insidiously, a malignant normality.

This is not something which we—having survived totalitarianism in the twentieth century—are unfamiliar with in our own time. The way in which “normality” is entirely relative to whatever people will tolerate at any given moment is expressed neatly in terms of the Overton Window: the recursive relationship between civil and political discourses, the way in which formerly unpalatable ideas and policies have a tendency to creep, surreptitiously, into the everyday. Today we have the “new normal,” “quiet quitting,” and a hundred other internet terms that simply describe the zombie-like existence—the late capitalism malaise—that we’ve been stewing in for decades. Adorno’s quip about solidarity meaning distinctly different things between the rulers and the ruled, the former being too cagey to reveal their true intentions and the latter having nowhere else to turn—as far as where we are today, this seems eerily on the nose.43 But malignant normality is nothing new. Adorno puts it into perspective: “The logic of history is as destructive as the people that it brings into prominence: wherever its momentum carries it, it reproduces equivalents of past calamity. Normality is death” (MM 60). That we can get used to just about anything is, when one thinks about it, the scariest thing imaginable.

43 Just think of United States Senator Josh Hawley, raising his fist in solidarity with protesters (election denialists) on January 6th, 2021, followed by the leaked footage of him hours later, hightailing it from the same mob.
Prison deaths take on a casualness normally reserved for the most banal occurrences. Note the clipped, declarative sentences with which Victor Serge, author of *Men in Prison*, reports: “The dead man was carried off. Voices were heard. Someone even laughed. The terror stayed with only a few; but these it filled with an enormous shadow of despair” (*MiP* 176). Revolutionary writer George Jackson claims that prison life in San Quentin had required of him only “minor psychic adjustments.” Arthur Koestler, who served time in Franco’s prison in 1930s Spain, would seem to agree: “[T]he unusual conditions in which I was living produced unusual reactions; the whole machinery of my mind functioned according to new laws, completely strange to me” (*DwD* 105). But these are retrospective analyses, lucid remarks made by high-functioning intellectuals with the benefit of hindsight. The phenomenon itself vacillates between subtle and jarring, so that the “adjustments” to “new laws” are imposed on minds consciously and subconsciously. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, describes the process: “It was a question of both making the slightest departures from correct behavior subject to punishment, and of giving a punitive function to the apparently indifferent elements of the disciplinary apparatus: so that, if necessary, everything might serve to punish the slightest thing: each subject finds himself caught in a punishable, punishing universality” (178). Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, reflects on the terrorizing effect of Stalin’s “liquidation” program: “But why like this? Couldn’t they have done it at night—quietly? But why do it quietly? In that case a bullet would be wasted. In the daytime crowd the bullet had an educational function. It, so to speak, struck down ten with one shot” (187). One down, another nine silenced. An economy of terror.
Despite all the horror taking place in broad daylight, it remains characteristic of totalitarian regimes to maintain the appearance of normality sans malignancy, some sort of plausible deniability. The show trial becomes ubiquitous for fascists and Stalinists alike, a perverse dog and pony show designed specifically to launder the liquidation of millions considered to be seditionists, oppositionists, and other variations on the “enemy of the Party” theme. Arthur Koestler, in his memoir, describes the “scenario”: “The scenario of this sinister comedy was always the same. The proceedings lasted two or three minutes. The so-called Prosecutor demanded the death sentence; always without exception. The so-called Defending Officer—always and without exception—asked for a life sentence in view of mitigating circumstances. Then the prisoner was marched off. He was never informed of his sentence” (163). It was death, of course, always and without exception. In the Archipelago, Solzhenitsyn places the number at sixty-six million. “We, of course, cannot vouch for this figure,” he admits, “but we have none other that is official” (178). Life was so cheap under Stalin’s rule that reliable death rates likely never even existed.44

Within an autocratic body, organs are at once compartmentalized and interconnected, individually accountable yet in sync. In this analogy, the prison would be the liver, the body’s “janitor,” cleaning up the mess as best it can and making it seem as though one weren’t perpetually being made. Though the janitor’s job remains unremarkably consistent over time, the technology “advances,” and then the euphemisms emerge to polish up the crudity, make it more palatable by “modern” standards (to extend

44 “Even with ‘an almost unmanageable abundance of material on the purges’ from 1929 to 1937,” Hannah Arendt writes in The Origins of Totalitarianism, “they contain no indication of the number of victims or any other vital statistical data. Whenever figures are given, they are hopelessly contradictory” (xxv).
the analogy, the janitor morphs into the maintenance engineer). Torture becomes “enhanced interrogation.” Serge muses on this very phenomenon near the beginning of *Men in Prison*. As he’s being processed into jail, he realizes that the building he’s in has a sordid history: “We are in one of the medieval towers of the *Conciergerie*, I discover….In earlier times they used to put the victims ‘to the question’ on the rack in the cellars of this very tower. Today they apply Bertillon’s scientific system upstairs. This is the stairway of progress” (29). Around the same time, one of Adorno’s most cited lines would appear in his *Negative Dialectics*: “No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the atom bomb” (320).

Both writers use irony to subvert the dominant narrative of Enlightenment progress: how our propensity to dehumanize only seems to sharpen in proportion to our techno-bureaucratic knowhow. Incidentally, Solzhenitsyn would point out a similar situation with the Stalinists: how, for a group so beholden to data and reason, they practiced what he called a “flexible dialectics,” whereby virtually any “fact” or data point could be backfitted into their narrative. Forced confessions, for instance, were considered by prosecutors to be ironclad proof of guilt. Like Adorno and Serge, Solzhenitsyn compares primitive methods to our own, exposing the irony:

[T]he simple-minded Middle Ages used dramatic and picturesque methods to squeeze out the desired confessions: the rack, the wheel, the bed of nails, impalement, hot coals, etc. In the twentieth century, taking advantage of our more highly developed medical knowledge and extensive prison experience (and someone seriously defended a doctoral thesis on this theme), people came to
realize that the accumulation of such impressive apparatus was superfluous and that, on a mass scale, it was also cumbersome. (GA 43)

Just make them sign, pure and simple. This of course became de rigueur methodology, the new malignant normality. The omnipotence of those in charge had to become sedimented in the popular mind in order for the Party to operate with impunity. Solzhenitsyn describes the molding of the camp commanders, how easily they “draw the conclusion that they rule very wisely”: “Every day each ordinary event permits them visibly to observe their superiority: people rise before them, stand at attention, bow; at their summons people do not just approach but run up to them; on their orders people do not simply leave but run out” (GA 283). In Midnight in the Century, Serge’s novel about a group of “oppositionists” languishing in a Stalinist camp for exiles (no longer “zeks,” but not quite “citizens”), he uses free indirect discourse to mimic the mentality of a commander having his way with a female prisoner: “It was right, just. It was the working of natural law. Since he had the power, represented order, was appointed by his superiors, was deserving, rewarded according to his merits” (106). We detect the irony, but the point is well taken: the inculcation of “natural law” into the minds of the oppressed facilitates the victor’s “triumphal procession” through history. It all becomes malignantly normal.

Walter Benjamin argues that “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (Illuminations 256). In systems of social and ideological domination, total authority and unquestioned servility are simply two sides of the same coin. According to Michael W. Jennings, author of Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of
Literary Criticism, Benjamin’s oeuvre represents “the protracted attempt to articulate how literature in general and specific works in particular hold within them the key to man’s understanding of the world and its history” (4). I argue that the works by these authors in particular—Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Arthur Koestler, Victor Serge—hold the keys to understanding how ideas are applied to history; or, as Hannah Arendt would say, how “the movement of history and the logical process of [ideas] are supposed to correspond to each other, so that whatever happens, happens according to the logic of one ‘idea.’ (OT 469). Put simply, how malignant normality proliferates under totalitarian rule.

These texts explore and interrogate the historical happenstance whereby virtually anything—repression, oppression, imprisonment, murder—can be justified in the name of ideology. Though the events depicted in the texts occurred in the early to mid-twentieth century, we believe that, for reasons that should be clear, the conditions under which Benjamin and his colleagues (Adorno, Horkheimer, Arendt) wrote their texts, and the salience of their analyses, are as relevant as ever. Perhaps even more. “An image of a larger totality—the experience of a historical epoch—resides monadologically in the work of art” (Jennings 145). Congealed, as it were, within the object resides an entire epochal history, its mere existence documenting not only the aesthetic achievements of a culture, but the concealed atrocities: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Illuminations 256). These prison texts are prime examples, not only of the documented barbarism of which Benjamin speaks, but of the “spark of hope” to which he looked for redemption.

These texts are monadic, metonymic representations of an epoch. “Every epoch,” Benjamin claims, “not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its
awakening” (AP 13). Reassembled here, in fragmentary form, these texts become a “constellation” or “dialectical image” (to be explored further in the following chapter). Such an image, according to Benjamin, contains within it a “weak Messianic power” to ignite a spark, to awaken the slumbering revolutionary spirit, spring it to action. “It is owing to this monadological structure that the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history” (AP 475). The present reawakens the past and recontextualizes it: citable fragments from these texts, some memorable and some seemingly insignificant, are reemployed here, shedding light on the “current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible” (Illuminations 257).

I suggest that in these texts, composed by prisoners, our present moment recognizes itself: a “constellation” of past and present, a prism through which a new “now” can be created in service of reviving a vanquished and forgotten then. “By regrouping the material elements of phenomena in a philosophically informed constellation,” argues Richard Wolin, author of Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption, “an idea will emerge and the phenomena will thereby stand redeemed” (92). As totalitarianism threatens, once again, to overtake parts of the west, perhaps these texts can provide some much-needed images. We should be “ceaselessly salvaging the past,” argues Marxist scholar Terry Eagleton, “causing the shades of the dead to congregate around the empty pit of a slaughtered present” (50). We can revisit the theoretical masterworks about encroaching authoritarianism, the inherent dangers associated with “reason” and the compulsion to conquer nature (and we will), but without the novels and memoirs of the period, the “imagistic” objects that captured an epoch, we’re missing a crucial piece of the puzzle. Without revisiting this constellation of great works, we risk,
as Benjamin says, “becoming a tool of the ruling classes” (Illuminations 255). This isn’t a retelling or rerecording of predigested facts and historical happenings. It won’t be a retrospective analysis about the horrors of the previous century. We will neither adhere to chronology nor will we attempt to establish continuity, a linear chain of events. We aim less to see “the way it really was” and more to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (ibid).

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If not for ideology, predicated on the implementation of utopia for future generations, the death camps and gulags would not have existed; serving as both training ground and laboratory, the camps lie at the core of the malignant normality that swept across Europe. “I am a robot,” writes Serge in Men in Prison, “who knows in advance all the movements he will ever make, and all the faces he will ever meet; reminds me that this will go on for 1,300 days (if only I survive)” (110). And later, “The law of kill or be killed was reaffirmed for my generation. I would have preferred to take my part in the action, the common suffering, to fall like the others” (ibid 150). In the final pages of the book, Serge ponders the psychological torture of the “condemned men”—their final hours juxtaposed against his own imminent release: “They can’t imagine what death is. I can no longer imagine what life is” (200). What Serge has to say about the malignancy of oppression in Santé prison in early twentieth-century Paris can be said about all prisons, and under all regimes: “Prison tries to stultify: to mechanize all movements, efface character, desiccate the brain. That is its method of cutting down the defeated rabble of the social struggle which, in the last analysis, is what we are” (MiP 129). And being the empath that he is, Serge reserves an entire chapter for the guards, who he views as just another casualty of
malignancy: “Are his hours any less heavy than ours? We suffer for years; he suffers by
the day….The guards are no better and no worse than the men they guard” (ibid 140).
Simply put, the malignancy is total, as befitting the totality of the regime’s rule. It
pervades every aspect of daily life.

Of all of the literature that the Russian prison camps produced, there’s little doubt
that Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* stands as a
document of malignant normality *par excellence*. Taking place over the course of a single
day and seen through the eyes of an ordinary “zek,” the book examines the sheer
mundanity, the grind, that camp life was (*is*) for the average prisoner. Nothing
remarkable takes place: no tortures, no murders, no uprisings—but that’s precisely the
point. Solzhenitsyn’s goal here is to showcase the malignancy, not in its ascendancy, but
in its sedimentation, its opacity: “*One day* was meant to make the invisible visible,”
argues Russian scholar Richard Tempest, “the imperceptible perceptible, and the
prisoners, anonymous in their huddled masses, identifiable as living and suffering human
beings” (in Klimoff 57). Overt violence is absent, but the threat of violence undergirds
nearly every sentence of this short novel. The book depicts an ordinary day in the gulag
as seen through the eyes of Ivan Denisovich (aka “Shukov”), yet there’s little doubt that
the book is based in fact, and I suggest that it’s synecdochical: with Shukov standing in
for the average prisoner and the book as a whole encapsulating the experience.

Adorno scholar Shierry Weber-Nicholsen borrows the term “malignant
normality” from psychiatrist and author Robert J. Lifton to describe Adorno’s critique of
encroaching totalitarianism during and after the war.45 What she has to say about

Adorno’s approach to *Minima Moralia* could be applied to Solzhenitsyn’s approach to his

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[I]t takes articulations and reflections on individual experience, and the individual experience of only one person...so as to speak its data and its method of research” (260). Both authors wrote while living in exile, Adorno in California and Solzhenitsyn in Vermont, and both men mine their individual experiences and observations to critique the broader historical epochs in which they were living: “the illusion of the individual’s absolute autonomy has disintegrated, but the remnants of the individual remain enough outside the malignant levelling of contemporary society to reflect on it” (ibid). One can get just enough distance, as these texts show, to generate some much-needed resistance.

Induction into the machinery of prison comes with its own brand of perverse normality, starting with the initial arrest, the “incidental irrelevancies,” which, Solzhenitsyn argues, operate almost by osmosis:

At what point, then, should one resist? When one’s belt is taken away? When one is ordered to face into a corner? When one crosses the threshold of one’s home? An arrest consists of a series of incidental irrelevancies, of a multitude of things that do not matter, and there seems no point in arguing about any one of them individually—especially at a time when the thoughts of the person arrested are wrapped tightly about the big question: “What for?”—and yet all of these incidental irrelevancies taken together implacably constitute the arrest. (GA 10)

One is sucked into the system step by step: a series of seemingly irrelevant depersonalizations, all of them adding up, in the aggregate, to total deindividuation. In an aphorism called *Refuge for the homeless*, Adorno articulates the experience: “The sleepless are on call at any hour, unresistingly ready for anything, alert and unconscious
at once….No individual can resist this process” (MM 42). For the simple reason that the
individual is being atomized by design.

One of the greatest ironies revealed in Solzhenitsyn’s first novel is that despite
being incarcerated under “Article 58”—refusal to comply with the tenets of “utopic”
socialism—the inmates are driven to extreme misery and economizing. Forced
collectivization was inhibiting production on the outside, de-incentivizing farmers and
proletarianizing the next generation: “The farmers were failing to fulfill their quota of
work days….All the young men and women, without exception, had managed to get
away to work in factories or in the peat-processing works” (Ivan 33). Whatever
oppressive circumstances that were occurring out on the steppe or in the villages was
naturally intensified in the camps. Subsistence living takes on a whole new level of
intensity: “During the march [to work] it preyed on your mind: you tortured yourself by
imagining that somebody else’s bit of the ration might be substituted for yours. Why,
good friends quarreled about it, even to the point of fighting!” (27). Ordered to secure an
edifice but left without supplies, the work crews often resorted to theft: “I know a little
place over there where those prefabs are going up,” says Kilgas, a coworker and prison
mate of the protagonist, “Let’s go and scrounge it” (44). Prisoners learn how to cut
corners; socialization had reduced them all to living below subsistence.

According to The Gulag Archipelago, there’s little question as to the accuracy of
these “fictionalized” accounts: “According to camp records, which were not meant to
preserve for history the fact that political prisoners were also starved to death, they were
entitled to supplementary ‘minor’s rations’ and ‘bonus dishes,’ which were miserable
enough even before three lots of thieves got at them” (332). Among the key attributes for
socialism, then, are acute cunningness and hording: every man looking out for his own interests, the irony of which was not lost on Adorno: “The prerequisites for [socialism] were knowledge and freedom of decision: if they are lacking, blind particular interest immediately reasserts itself” (MM 55). One went to the gulag for disloyalty to the “Socialist Way of Life” (see below) only to find its manifestation to be utterly anathema to its internal logic. Under capitalism one is free to starve; under Stalinism one simply starves in faux solidarity.

And then there’s the matter of somehow “educating” the next generation in the context of an unstable system. With history literally in flux, educators themselves become completely cynical, as Serge depicts in Midnight in the Century: “By next year, the present Superintendent of Schools would be assigned someplace else or sent to prison. His successor would pay no heed to a future which would be out of date before it was born. He would order other plans in line with other directives” (133). Solzhenitsyn describes the same situation in The Gulag Archipelago:

[Y]ou had to be more of a hypocrite [than] before, had to tell the children many more lies—because the lies had had time to mature, to permeate the syllabus in versions painstakingly elaborated by experts on teaching technique and by school inspectors…. [Y]ou had to anathematize the poverty-stricken past and hymn our present plenty (though long before the war you and the children had watched whole villages die of hunger…). (334-5)

Such secrets, reinterpretations and repressed memories, have a way of bleeding out into the collective (un)consciousness and aggregating in the form of a psychological debt that one generation passes on to the next: “We have done far too much damage by looking at
people as entries in a table. Whether we like it or not, the future will force us to reflect on the reason for [our] behavior” (ibid 335). Benjamin speaks to this phenomenon in the second thesis of his Philosophy of History: “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (Illuminations 354). The stakes couldn’t be higher here: authoritarian regimes on both ends of the political spectrum were threatening to efface any and all remnants of tradition and replace them with a new narrative.

Messianic power, in Benjamin’s sense, casts the writer as the messiah, urgently transcribing a message. Given that the past has a considerable hold over us, both in terms of our desires and our tendency to contextualize both personal and societal experiences in light of what has already transpired, the “messianic power” which we possess is simply our own ability (or tendency) to create an experience which is in turn transmitted (or propelled) toward the future. But this messianic power is weak, italicized for emphasis, in that the crystallization—the constellation of past and present—is ephemeral: “Each moment it has lived becomes a citation à l’ordre du jour” (Illuminations 254). There’s simply no guarantee that the “constellation” will be recognized for what it is: aggregated potentialities.46 It crystalizes in a “flash,” during a brief “moment of danger.” The receiver must be both observant and alert.

46 Another way of reading Benjamin’s concept of “weak, messianic power” is simply that such an ability necessarily weakens as each generation is bound up in the collective history that has come before, and thus it degrades, like a battery over time. Benjamin himself alludes to something like this at the opening of “The Storyteller”: “[The storyteller] has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant” (Illuminations 83)—an atrophying potentiality that quietly calls, perhaps, for
In a variation on this thesis that appears in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin likens life itself to “a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time” (479). Thus, this idea that events can be erased from the record (like Stalin’s famous airbrushed photos), that autocrats can murder their way toward a passive society—kill the dissenters, the suspected dissenters, all associates of said dissenters—is patently absurd, but cannot be ignored. There is no “progress” when, as Horkheimer says, we employ “bloodshed and collapse as an immanent law of development in the transition to freedom” (*TAS* 12). Redemption is anything but assured. It represents a race against obsolescence, with the clock ceremoniously running out, the victors’ narrative poised for sedimentation. Benjamin’s “entire project,” claims Jennings, “can be read as the attempt to recognize these revolutionary shards and, in particular, to exploit their revolutionary potential” (128). Again, this is why we argue that compiling these “shards” in this way, here, is worthwhile.

But back to this culture of hoarding and unscrupulousness among the inmates, which Solzhenitsyn depicts rather ironically, with prisoners actively avoiding work assignments with the “Socialist Way of Life”: the sector of the camp to be shunned at all costs. Even smoking was something to be stingy about: “They all looked at one another to see who was going to light up. No one did. Either they had no tobacco or they were holding onto it, unwilling to let it be seen” (*Ivan* 57). The structural bureaucracy lends itself less to orderly function and more to rampant thievery: “They rob you here, they rob you in the camp, they rob you even earlier—in the warehouse. And those who do the robbing don’t swing picks” (ibid 59). All of this pilfering and “economizing” starts at the its retroactive redemption. There is not, nor will there ever be, a definitive interpretation of Benjamin’s theory.
top, of course, then trickles down from the administrators to the poorest of prisoners. Not even care packages sent by loved ones are safe: “If there was anything home-baked, or some tasty sweetmeats or sausage or smoked fish, the guard would take a bite at it himself. (And you just try to get high and mighty and complain, and they’ll immediately say that this and that are forbidden and won’t issue them to you at all.) Every zek who got a parcel had to give and give, starting with the guard who opened it” (ibid 107). (Implicit in this is the living standard of the guards themselves, who presumably have their own rations and accommodations.) One survives the camp experience, not through “socializing” the meager resources, but through slyness and stealth, a phenomenon corroborated by Koestler: “cunning and hypocrisy developed to the point of reflex action. Of all other means [the prisoner] has been deprived” (DwD 197). This has important implications for what Hannah Arendt calls the “human condition.” Rather than having a “human nature” that is unchanging over time, we condition our environment and, recursively, are conditioned by it. We all partake in a shared condition without there being, as Nietzsche would say, a “frog perspective” on the matter, no human nature outside of history. We actively engage in the shaping of ourselves and each other, simultaneously. Thus, when Ioan Davies, author of Writers in Prison, says that “A person who survives prison through anger, self-indulgence, or mere cunning cannot be said truly to have survived” (118)—his point is that we’re not simply releasing “rehabilitated” subjects back into society. The following appears in a letter written by a convict named Adam Michnic, while he was serving time in Poland’s Gdansk prison:

I am afraid not of what they will do to us, but of what they can make us into. For people who are outlaws for a long time may feed on their own traumas and
emotions which, in turn, strangle their reason and their ability to see reality. Even
the best people can be demoralized by years of persecution and the shock of
regaining their lost stature. I pray that we do not return like ghosts who hate the
world, cannot understand it, are unable to live in it. I pray that we do not change
from prisoners into prison guards. (99)

What if we’re inculcating broken souls, cynical subjects who reenter society stigmatized
and embittered? Will they unwittingly contribute, then, to the malignancy to which they
were relegated—shaping it, conditioning it, metastasizing with it?

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It became commonplace, malignantly, for Stalin’s regime to steal not only tangible items
but conceptions, even time itself: “Again there wasn’t going to be a Sunday this week”
(Ivan 108). Of course there was going to be a Sunday; this is merely indicative of the
lengths to which the master will go to control every aspect of the subject’s life, right
down to the way in which he orients himself temporally. Benjamin recounts a specific
example of resistance during the July Revolution of 1830: “On the first evening of
fighting it turned out that the clocks in the towers were being fired on simultaneously and
independently from several places in Paris” (Illuminations 262). Shooting at clock tower
is both a literal and symbolic attempt at irrupting the “progress” of historical continuity,
“a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (ibid 263).

The entire ideology behind the camps had supposedly been predicated on Marx’s
writings, some notion that work “was a first-rate medicine for any illness”47 (Ivan 18).

47 Much has been made of the ideology behind “corrective labor camps” as envisioned by Lenin and
promulgated by Stalin: some notion that Marx advocated for harsh prison labor as a corrective measure. I
can find no evidence for this in his writings, but it would seem likely that, as the Nazis did with Nietzsche,
the Stalinists were prone to cherry picking and, shall we say, slanted hermeneutics.
But the incentive to appear “productive” is neither about reformation nor party loyalty. In an environment of sheer desperation and depravity, whoever controls the food controls production: “The cook gave double helpings to the squad leaders, and they either ate the extra helping themselves or gave it to their deputies” (ibid 61). Squad leaders, who themselves are prisoners, are respected (as opposed to the “brass” who are loathed) and from there any surplus flows downward: “A guard can’t get people to budge even in working hours, but a squad leader can tell his men to get on with the job even during the break, and they’ll do it. Because he’s the one who feeds them” (ibid 73). “That bowl of soup—it was dearer than freedom, dearer than life itself, past, present, and future” (ibid 105, my emphasis). For the duration of time that a prisoner eats, even a tiny amount, everything stops. “In the physics of madness,” Koestler remarks, “a pebble can not only set an avalanche in motion but can also stop it” (DwD 106). Serge prefers metaphors referring to nature: “History moves slowly….When the lava has hardened over the fire, when everyone’s revolution turns into the counter-revolution of a few against everybody” (MC 169).

These compressions of time and space, stoppages, hardenings—why are these salient? For brief moments when a prisoner finds peace (stuffing his face with thin cabbage soup or cold kasha) both thinking and time crystallize into a “monad” or “a Messianic cessation of happening” (Illuminations 263). In his “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” Benjamin employs a railway analogy: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt at the passenger—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake” (402). Something so simple as nothing else mattering in that moment; this is
Benjamin’s idea of “frozen dialectics” (to be discussed more in the next chapter): an image containing a “precious but tasteless seed” (*Illuminations* 263). Koestler articulates this phenomenon near the end of *Darkness at Noon*, when the protagonist, Rubashov, laments the lostness of his youth, the dissolution of the “grammatical fiction” that is his personhood:

Sometimes he would respond unexpectedly to a tune, or even the memory of a tune, or of the folded hands of the *Pietà*, or of certain scenes from childhood. As if a tuning fork had been struck, there would be answering vibrations, and once this has started a state would be produced which the mystics called “ecstasy” and saints “contemplation”; the greatest and soberest of modern psychologists had recognized this state as fact and called it the “oceanic sense.” And, indeed, one’s personality dissolved as a grain of salt in the sea; but at the same time the infinite sea seemed to be contained in the grain of salt. The grain of salt could no longer be located in time and space. (*DaN* 206-7)

One is temporarily unmoored, not unthinking, but rather immersed in a pregnant pause amidst competing external forces. This, for Benjamin, is the portal to revolutionary potential: “Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event”\(^\text{48}\) (*AP* 461). It’s the idea expressed, crystalized, in the “total event” that interests us here. In these monadic moments—stoppages, compressions, hardenings—the texts, as objects, seem to be expressing something essential: that the present is not

\(^{48}\) We notice here, as well, Proust’s influence on Benjamin, as the whole theme of time and space and the “oceanic sense” are linked to the *memoire involontaire*: “But this very concentration in which things that normally just fade and slumber consume themselves in a flash is called rejuvenation. *A la Recherche du temps perdu* is the constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost awareness” (*Illuminations* 111).
something that follows the past, but is communicating with it, and that it is our task to recognize, in these texts, something of our own time.

Also, by invoking the “the greatest and soberest of modern psychologists,” we suspect that Koestler is speaking of Freud, who ruminates about the “oceanic sense” in his Civilization and its Discontents: “It is a feeling which [one] would like to call a sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, something ‘oceanic’” (4). This echoes the theme of another great prison work, Eternity of the Stars by Louis-Auguste Blanqui, a nineteenth-century revolutionary whom Benjamin revered (he cites Blanqui throughout his work, including the Theses, Das Passagen-Werk, and “Central Park”). Ostensibly a work of astronomical theory, Eternity by the Stars can be read as an extended allegory on the author’s theory of revolutionary praxis: “A furious melee rages for countless years, on a battlefield billions of billions of leagues wide. In this part of the universe, all is now nothing more than a vast atmosphere of flames” (102). In his Arcades Project, Benjamin cites Blanqui in the context of his own theory of monadology: “No! No one has access to the secret of the future. Scarcely possible for even the most clairvoyant are certain presentiments, rapid glimpses….The Revolution alone, as it clears the terrain, will reveal the horizon” (736, my emphasis).

Thus, the opportunity for justice opens up in the actualization, in the seized-upon “rapid glimpses”—monadic moments that malignant normality is meant to suppress. These moments are to be found not in some deferred ideal abstracted from political discourse, but in a state of unrest which constitutes the beginning of any contemplation of history that has the right to call itself dialectical. This state of unrest refers to the demand
on the researcher [or the author] to abandon the tranquil contemplative attitude
toward the object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in
which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself precisely in this present.

(Benjamin, “Fuchs” 28)

Consider this image that Serge felt was salient enough to include in Men in Prison:

“Above our heads a glittering winter sky, full of constellations, spread out its deep blacks
and blues, its profusion of stars, the ripples of the light in its shadowy gulfs. Had I ever
understood the marvel of a simple starry night before? For four hundred days I had been
deprived of it: and it was a revelation” (99, my emphasis). A “Messianic cessation of
happening…a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.” Benjamin
believes that such “rapid glimpses” can be gleaned from objects (texts) of a particular
epoch by researchers (authors) of the present: the past has to be (re)discovered in a way
that could not have been anticipated, because aesthetic objects contain certain clues to
emancipative potential that were still inchoate at the time of the object’s construction (or
composition).

In her article, “Walter Benjamin—Revolutionary Writer (1),” Susan Buck-Morss
explains: “Benjamin found documentation in texts that had been overlooked….Or, when
he examined famous books, it was to illuminate what hid in the corners and crannies of
those texts, where the authors had not intended that the reader’s gaze be focused” (58).
For Benjamin, writing is seeing, and opportunities for change occur imagistically, not
teleologically; the unredeemed sins of oppression get their “now-time” when the moment
(monad) is glimpsed, when the lava hardens, when the pebble has halted the avalanche:
“Its founding concept is not progress but actualization” (AP 460). In the constellation of
all these citations, recontextualized here, we find the pauses, the hardenings, the revelations: clues to linking the present to the past, not temporally, but dialectically: “the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent” (AP 462). The only “genuine” images are, according to Benjamin, dialectical ones and “the place where one encounters them is language” (AP 462). Language for Benjamin represents a “materialist presentation of history [leading] the past to bring the present into a critical state” (ibid 471). Serge’s “ripples of the light in its shadowy gulfs” is just such an image, a monad, a “Telescoping of the past into the present” (ibid).

In the Theses, Benjamin employs Blanqui’s name in his repudiation of the Social Democrats, whom he sees as having capitulated to the status quo: “Within three decades they managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, though it had been the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century” (Illuminations 260). Thus, the Social Democrats, not unlike the totalitarians, are guilty of treating history as a palimpsest: something to be overwritten to serve the dominant narrative. By only looking forward, abandoning remembrance—this is how malignant normality proliferates. When the “good guys” are willing to capitulate, to acquiesce in the name of “progress,” the cause is lost, endlessly deferred and eventually forgotten. For true revolutionaries like Benjamin and Blanqui and Serge, however, “the spark of hope” never dies: What follows Serge’s “revelatory” sensation at the site of a sky “full of constellations” can be read as allegorical: “I would have fallen, my eyes lost up there, while I stumbled among the rails, the ties, and the cables stretched across the ground, if the other links in the penitentiary caterpillar hadn’t pushed me, dragged me, half-carried me toward the light of the station” (MiP 99). His image of the chain gang as a “caterpillar” is key: a scaley-winged
lepidoptera, inching its way toward its goal, unceasing and unwilling to relent before reaching the “light of the station.” Serge’s novels are not plot-driven; they’re image-driven, which is why they’re so memorable: “History decays into images,” Benjamin argues, “not into stories” (AP 476). Serge’s chain gang can be read, also, as the binding of us all to the historian’s linear “chain of events” that compels us to conformism, our blind allegiance to the history of the victor.

Benjamin argues that it is precisely within these “tremendous abbreviations”—grains of salt, rapid glimpses, ripples of light—that we find revolutionary potential, opportunities for redemption: “The present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history or mankind in an enormous abridgement” (ibid). Again, these are monadic moments or “now-time” (Jetztzeit), comprising all the missing moments of the past, the whole tradition of the oppressed in concentrated form: a messianic relation. Solzhenitsyn, like the other writers under analysis, is fighting not only for the oppressed, but for the history of the oppressed, because it is precisely this that the victors are threatening to consign to oblivion. “There it comes, that brief moment for which a zek lives….This was all he thought about now: we’ll survive. We’ll stick it out, God willing, till it’s over” (Ivan 117, my emphasis).

I suggest that Solzhenitsyn and the others are attempting what Benjamin calls “materialistic historiography”: not the recording of the past per se, but the redeeming of it. The events of these texts, fictionalized or not, take place within a specific historical context, coinciding with one of the most destructive mergers of the twentieth century: the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, otherwise known as the (ironically-named) “German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact.” The real trouble began, according to Benjamin, “At a moment
when the politicians in whom the opponents of Fascism had placed their hopes are prostrate, and confirm their defeat by betraying their own cause” (*Illuminations* 258).49 Each of these authors (Solzhenitsyn, Koestler, Serge) served time under Socialist and/or Fascist regimes, and the focus of their texts is less about recording widely known and accepted historical atrocities and more about giving voice to those who perished anonymously, the “human flotsam” that got swept up and annihilated during the years when autocrats on both sides of the political divide were consolidating their totalitarian rule: in Adorno’s words, the ones who “fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic” (*MM* 161). Solzhenitsyn describes the process metaphorically: “The history of this sewage system is the history of an endless swallow and flow; flood alternating with ebb and ebb again with flood; waves pouring in, some big, some small; brooks and rivulets flowing in from all sides; trickles oozing in through gutters; and then just plain individually scooped-up droplets” (*GA* 20). The “individually scooped-up droplets,” the likes of Solzhenitsyn, Koestler, and Serge, are the ones who survived, who had the wherewithal to tell the tale. It is those “trickles oozing in through gutters,” the “endless swallow and flow”—for whom they write. These texts are “messianic” in that they “blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history” (*Illuminations* 263). If history is written by the victors, then I would argue that we can use these prison texts “to establish a unique relation to the past—i.e., one in which the rare and endangered images of redeemed life are separated out from the historical flow” (Wolin 263). Or as Marxist scholar Terry Eagleton would say, these texts

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49 The importance of the pact in the context of Benjamin’s later work has been widely noted. Jennings writes, “The Hitler-Stalin pact is often adduced as the immediate instigation for the composition of [the Theses], and there can be no doubt that Benjamin’s sense of isolation as a German Jew in exile was exacerbated by the new political situation” (63).
represent an “irruption of difference” whereby “the past is turned upon its axis to speak to the present, as a warning that the present must not compulsively repeat it” (58).

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In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn describes the immense pressure put upon young soldiers to join the NKVD, the stormtroopers of the camps, while the group was still a fledgling band of goons being groomed to do Stalin’s bidding: “The NKVD school dangled before us special rations and double or triple pay. Our feelings could not be put into words—and even if we had the words, fear would have prevented our speaking them aloud to one another” (74). Thus, as early as 1918, there was a sense that something toxic was brewing, a sort of Faustian bargain for each and every Russian conscript to consider, an encroaching cancer being normalized. Coded language being disseminated, inferences being drawn, but nothing being openly discussed. It’s almost like a fraternity: the nefariousness reveals itself in small doses (no date rapes at first, just a lot of in-jokes, passwords, and secret handshakes). Then the real testing begins, and there was surely some apprehension, a sense of foreboding on the part of some who’d been courted and enticed by the perks that the NKVD were offering. Solzhenitsyn describes the slow burn of indoctrination: “All those who had not visualized where and into what they were getting themselves now come to understand and are horrified. To be constantly a weapon of violence, a constant participant in evil! Not everyone can bring himself to do this, and certainly not right off” (*GA* 282). But someplace in the cracks of one’s psyche—“where and into what”—the nuanced negotiation begins: *If I don’t go along with this, what’ll that mean for my future and for the future of my family?* And once ideology is grafted onto an already precarious material existence, the gaps in logic get filled in prescriptively:
“Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process—the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future” (Arendt, *OT* 469).

*No worries, soldier. History is on our side.*

Solzhenitsyn muses on his own narrow circumvention: “So I would like to imagine: if, by the time war broke out, I had already been wearing an NKVD officer’s insignia on my blue tabs, what would I have become? What do shoulder boards do to a human being?” (*GA* 282). Though the machinations would take some time to manifest, the answer is simple: “[I]t is only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren’t” (ibid 75). Discomforting, surely, for anyone willing to entertain certain counterfactuals. For we’d all love to believe, whether we’re talking about a socialist or a fascist regime, that we’d have sided, unequivocally, with the oppressed. “But the line of dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being” (ibid). Such malignancy comes on the heels of a “conjunction of brutality and social norms,” claims Weber-Nicholsen, author of “Malignant Normality and the Dilemma of Resistance.” *Normality* ensues, Weber-Nicholsen claims, “because the brutality is couched, at least in superficial ways, in accepted social norms” (260-261). The author describes this phenomenon as “all encompassing, without exceptions or loopholes…[S]ocial actuality is total, without exit of any kind” (261). Though this totality can be resisted, often at the ultimate price, it cannot be escaped. Sooner or later, everyone ends up with either “bluecaps” on his shoulders or a number stenciled on the breast of his camp coat.

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50 Or, to paraphrase Stanley Milgram: *No, you must increase the voltage. It’s imperative that we continue with the experiment.*
It may be questioned why, in the context of *One Day in the Live of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn’s Shukov doesn’t seem at all resistant. Robert Louis Jackson, author of “The Mask of Solzhenitsyn,” refers to Shukov’s “art of adaptation”: “[M]an adapts to a difficult, dangerous, and often terrifying environment in order to survive….I[n] adapting he learns to master his environment, and in turn he shapes himself” (in Klimoff 43). Note the similarity to Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, the thesis of nature clashing with the antithesis of prison culture, synthesizing into something resembling resilience, or, at the very least, what Koestler calls a “protective coloration”:

> From the very first day I felt that my new situation demanded of me a certain attitude….The role I had to play in this building—the role of an innocent abroad—came to me automatically, and gradually, during the following weeks and months, became a mask, which did not require any conscious effort on my part. I was able to observe in a living example what direct biological force this process of protective coloration exerts. (*DwD* 197)

In this we hear echoes of Jackson’s “minor psychic adjustments” and the “unusual reactions” that Koestler had alluded to earlier in his memoir—malignant normality is such that it creeps up slowly, seeping its way into the cracks of the collective psyche, playing both ends against the middle, until some horrific new state of normalcy has metastasized into full blown fascism or Stalinism. Who’s to say that it could never happen again?

But can we even find, in a “totalizing” regime, room for resistance? The existence of these texts, I’d argue, answers that question. If, as Adorno announces at the end of *Minima Moralia*’s aphorism twenty-nine that “The whole is the false,” then that implies
that there are always gaps, interstices to be found and exploited. Benjamin urges us to seek out “chambers”: “The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic” (GS 402). Political action in the present reveals itself, *a posteriori*, to be a portal to an unredeemed past. As Adorno points out in an essay of his called “Progress”: “In Benjamin progress obtains legitimation in the doctrine that the idea of the happiness of unborn generations—without which one cannot speak of progress—inalienably includes the idea of redemption” (CM 145). Can we really move on without cleaning up the mess that we’ve made? Inevitably the spill finds its way from one room to the next. And soon enough, the stain sets.

But once again, Hegel is turned on his head: his teleology and totalization have led to a sort of proto-accelerationist ideology to which resistance is warranted. Taking what may have been the first of many shots at Hegel over his storied career, Nietzsche, in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, warns his countrymen about the dangers of teleological thinking: “Such a way of looking at things has accustomed the Germans to talk about the ‘world process’ and to justify their own time as the necessary result of this world process; such a way of looking at things has established history in place of other spiritual powers, art and religion, as solely sovereign in so far as it is the ‘self-realizing concept’” (47). Funny how the time in which the philosopher lives always seems to be the “apex and terminus of world history” (ibid). Horkheimer would echo this sentiment nearly a century later, in an essay called “The Totalitarian State”: “The invocation of a scheme of social stages which demonstrates *post festum* the impotence of a past era was *at the time* an inversion of theory and politically bankrupt. Part of the
meaning of theory is the time at which it is developed” (11, his emphasis). We look at the past, not as a record of immutable facts or happenings, but as a set of historical data subject to interpretation; we look at it through the prism of the present. The idea that we should simply accelerate what history has deemed to be inevitable (what Horkheimer calls historical “midwifery”) is folly, ripe for ideologies leading to death and destruction, or as Solzhenitsyn describes it, “the consciousness of disaster on a mammoth scale” (GA 300). We know this. History needn’t be relied upon to tell us where we’re going; it’s sufficient enough to remind us of where we’ve been.

These prison works emerge out of these “Gaps” (the aphorism that closes Part One of Adorno’s Minima Moralia)—“through the dense, firmly founded but by no means uniformly transparent medium of experience” (MM 86). In the final aphorism (aptly titled Finale), Adorno refers once again to these “crevices,” this time in the context of resistance: “Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light” (263). Solzhenitsyn argues similarly in part IV of his epic work, The Gulag Archipelago, when he warns us, the stewards of the twenty-first century, that it’s incumbent upon us to do better: “Yes, and if it does not triumph, then all humanity’s history will have turned out to be an empty exercise in marking time, without the tiniest mite of meaning! To beat the enemy over the head with a club—even cavemen knew that” (313). From the slingshot to the atom bomb. Some engineers build bridges, others build dreams. Others, still, build nightmares.
Here both Adorno and Solzhenitsyn seem to be channeling Benjamin,\textsuperscript{51} whose main priority as the Nazis closed in was getting his manuscripts into Hannah Arendt’s hands for safekeeping; he resisted malignant normality, literally, until his dying breath. Among certain individuals, Nichosen argues, there exists “a deeply internalized moral code” that entails respect “extending generally to human beings”—not to just one’s ingroup or tribe. Writers such as Koestler, Solzhenitsyn, and Serge, all of them intellectuals in exile, represent such individuals: “custodian[s] of truth, as the condemned against the victor” (Adorno, \textit{MM} 138). And if history is any guide, we can never have enough of them.

\textsuperscript{51} The former with his invocation of the “messianic,” and the latter with his allusion to homogenous, empty time as time “marked”—the preoccupation of the historicist filling books with sterile “facts” and the victor’s “data.”
"The natural progression of things. – I was allowed a phone call. It had to be a collect call to a landline. And for my effort to produce the desired result, the other party would have to answer and be willing and able to help. I had two choices in the world. One was my mother. The other was Sergeant David Ferry, LAPD. It was no choice at all. The jig was up and I knew it. In a sense I was about to turn myself in officially, and not only to a cop, but to the hero of my youth. It was nighttime now, and he’d be home in Santa Clarita. I was taken to another holding area with a phone. I picked up the receiver and dialed 661. My sister-in-law answered. *This is a collect call from…JAMES… an inmate at the Los Angeles County Detention Facility. This call may be monitored or recorded for security purposes. If you wish to accept the charges, please press one.*

When the canned operator delivers your predicament, a unique shame washes over. There’s a half minute of muted, airy silence while the automated system patches you through. You can only imagine what the other person is thinking. The charges were accepted. My brother was placed on the line. “Dave,” I said, “thanks for taking the call. I’m guessing you have some idea of what’s happening.”

“Yeah, sounds like you’re locked up there, dude.” This was David. No matter how troubling the circumstances, he’d always try to lighten the mood. I explained to him that I’d been busted. I substituted the word “contraband” for “drugs,” being simply unready to use the latter. He indicated that he understood, and was gracious enough to leave it at that. “I’m so sorry to do this to you,” I said, “but if you’re available, I’m at the West Hollywood sheriff’s station. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can, and I’ll explain everything, I promise.” He assured me that he was on his way. “Hang in there, brother,” he said.
I was torn—relieved that the charade was finally over, but ashamed that I was me and not him. My brother, the cop, was on his way to jail to collect his brother, the drug dealer. And then I realized something. I was no longer a drug dealer.

I was brought back to my hole. Two or three hours went by and then I was summoned for, which meant that I’d made bail. I was escorted back out to the lobby and there he was, seated on a padded bench, dressed in a flannel shirt, bomber jacket and boots, his dad jeans tapered tightly at the ankles. I almost laughed. My brother always overdressed for the weather. He looked healthy, though, and handsome.

When David saw me, he stood. I’d been prepping for a heavy reception. Scornful looks, the air thick with disapproval, disappointment, disaffection—everything I believed I deserved. But then he smiled. And we hugged, long and tight. I ran my hand over his flattop. Once I’d known him so well, but now I had to see him in action, to be near him, to recall his nature. It seemed that expecting the worst in people had become like a preset. Darkness was my default option—a mindset that I knew, even at this early stage, I would have to take swift steps toward eradicating.

David was accompanied by the bondsman, a stocky Latino named Henry. I didn’t know that bail was negotiable. Mine had been set at $35,000, but Henry had haggled down to thirty. We shook hands, I thanked him, and he began walking me through the paperwork. I was being charged with several offenses including four counts of Possession of a Controlled Substance (Cocaine, Trazodone, Hydrocodone, Klonopin); Possession of a False Compartment with Intent to Use for a Controlled Substance (a cubbyhole in my bedroom); Use of a Structure to Suppress Law Enforcement (you remember); Possession of a Firearm During a Drug Offense. (A registered gun owner, I kept a Mossberg under
my bed. I bought it for the same reason I bought a lot of things: because I could. I never even fired it.) A bondsman gets ten percent, so I owed my brother three grand. I signed whatever was put in front of me and reclaimed my property.

It looked pretty bad. I was originally scheduled to be arraigned in two days, but due to the bond arrangement, my court date had been pushed to May. That meant two months of legal limbo, yet I was curiously calm. When you’ve spent your whole life worried about the future, there’s something perversely satisfying about having blown it. You know you’ll survive. And some part of you knows you’ll be better for it.

We hopped in Dave’s truck and headed north on San Vicente, turned right on Holloway heading east, and then merged onto Santa Monica. We passed Barney’s Beanery on the left, an iconic watering hole known to have been frequented by everyone from Clark Gable to Jim Morrison. It was also a favorite of my brother’s. “We should get back there sometime,” he said, referring to a night many years before. We’d gone to the Beanery in the summer of ’95, not long after I’d graduated college. He was a rookie cop. I was unemployed. Our parents were getting divorced. We were never so close. “Yeah,” I said, “I’d like that.”

We rode mostly in silence. We didn’t talk about what happened. We didn’t talk about what could happen. When we arrived at my building, my brother parked and killed the engine. I didn’t invite him in and he didn’t ask. Of course he was coming in for a beer; it was the natural progression of things.

The living room was cluttered. The cushions and rugs were all askew, the pillows were displaced, all the drawers had been pulled, boxes were upturned and the bookshelves had been cleared. I checked the bedroom. The mattress, comforter, sheets
and egg crate were all in disarray, and there were clumps of clothing everywhere. Barring a few hangers, the closet was cleared out. The kitchen was ransacked too, but the fridge was untouched. I grabbed two Coronas and popped them with a church key from the opened drawer by the sink. Back in the living room, my brother was sitting on the couch, which he’d reassembled. He’d gone out of his way to locate coasters for us too, which I found amusing under the circumstances. I took a seat beside him. “I’m sure you have some questions,” I said, handing him his beer. “Questions?” he said, “um, no, not really.” And then he took a casual sip. Parched, I took a long drippy swig, wiped my mouth on my wrist, and then just held the bottle between my knees. “How long have you known?”

“Known?” he said. “More like I pretty much knew. Visiting us less and less, showing up late, leaving early, looking burnt out, your phone always ringing on Christmas Eve, Thanksgiving—it was obvious you were up to something.”

I took another pull. “Does mom know?”

“Not exactly. She knows you’re full of shit, though. So does dad, so does Mike. You think you’re the only smart one in the family?”

We laughed.

I was tempted to ask why he’d never said anything—and by implication, why he hadn’t looked after me. But I stopped myself. I couldn’t blame the people who knew for not caring enough, so how could I blame the people who cared for not knowing enough? I’d been cunning on both ends, and it was time to shut down the guile in general. David’s keenness was unsurprising, but he didn’t have the facts, and regardless: the baby brother pass had long since expired. In a few hours I’d be thirty-five years old. So I just admitted that I was scared. “Look,” he said, “this is not a San Quentin situation. First of all, they
pile on the charges so they can pump their case to the DA, but some of them won’t stick. There was an ounce or so of coke, a handful of pills. You got no priors. You’re looking at probation, maybe a little county time, but that’s it.” If you were to show me a bag of coke, I’d be able to tell you the weight of it, within a decigram on either end. My brother could do this with an arrest report—for our purposes, a much handier skill.

We finished our beers. David gave me one last hug before he left. He told me that he loved me.
Critical theorist Hannah Arendt is perhaps best known for her controversial examination of the Eichmann trial and the “banality of evil” that Eichmann and others seemed to embody at Nuremberg. In a lesser-known work called *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes her theory of the *vita activa* (labor, work, and action), a sweeping categorical distillation of what humans do to survive. Labor, as conceptualized by Arendt, entails the biological and physiological activities associated with self-preservation (food, shelter, clothing). Work is about creating objects that contribute to the common world in which we live (furniture, dwellings, etc.). Action, however, is a bit more nuanced. Action is about intellectual activity, politics, the furtherance of our development as human beings in discourse with others. “Action would be an unnecessary luxury,” Arendt claims, “a capricious interference with general laws of behavior, if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing” (8).

No amount of ideological indoctrination can be employed, in other words, to replicate the “ideal” citizen. Free thinkers are liable to manifest here and there: humans are not “things” and thus are not subject to the sorts of social engineering required to maintain a totalitarian regime indefinitely. “Plurality,” Arendt continues, “is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, or will live” (ibid). What makes us “the
same” is that we’re all different: an aporia that mirrors the undergirding motor of totalitarianism (see below). Totalitarian regimes require subjects who obey, not those who act: acting is bad, acting presupposes discourse and discourse leads to a less atomized, more pluralized society. As humans, we may be subject to conditioning (hence the double entendre of Arendt’s title) but permanent rewiring is another matter altogether. One can see that, in attempting to build a nation comprised entirely of sycophantic automatons, authoritarian leaders, certain historical successes notwithstanding, have set quite a task for themselves.

Arendt argues that action is “revelatory” in that it discloses one’s essential being to others: “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world” (ibid 179). Action implies what we reveal through comportment: not the surface level, necessarily, but what lies beneath, what Jung calls our “shadow” selves. But if we don’t know who we really are, if our motivations are muddled and our motors are concealed, then logic follows that the results of our actions are incalculable. This is precisely what Arendt aims to emphasize, particularly in the realm of politics: “The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end” (233). Within the vast web that is human action, reaction, retaliation and counterretaliation, “the process [one] starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event…its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the

52 One could argue that Arthur Koestler’s great novel, Darkness at Noon, to be discussed in depth below, is predicated entirely on this concept: A man’s inability, despite his lifelong loyalty to “the Party,” to hide his true being from his colleagues. A man whose comportment—not what he says or does necessarily, but his essence—ultimately betrays his inner resistance to the regime.
backward glance of the historian who himself does not act” (ibid). An ideology gains momentum and the actors roll with it and there’s simply no shutting down the machine. Progress, claims Adorno, “can be convicted of its own irrationality because it always bewitches the means it uses into the ends it truncates” (CM 152).

There’s a contradiction at the core of any totalitarian system, an aporia at the heart that keeps getting deferred and never dealt with: its ultimate goal is never clearly defined, by design, because that would mean that one day those in charge would have to relinquish power. As Arendt puts it, the totalitarian ruler “must establish the fictitious world of the movement as a tangible working reality of everyday life, and he must, on the other hand, prevent this new world from developing a new stability” (OT 391). I alone can fix it—this is simply not a viable campaign slogan, or at least it shouldn’t be, for what is the fixer to do when the fixing is done? Amazing that so many people keep falling for this; but admittedly, this is rather facile and, as Benjamin argues, “not philosophical. The amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable” (Illuminations 257). Every point in history is a “critical turning point,” or as Benjamin would say, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (ibid). History lacks the “breathing spaces” that Arthur Koestler’s protagonist imagines (see below).

In his first novel, Men in Prison, Victor Serge argues that “An act is only as good as the end pursued and the result obtained” (83). In Midnight in the Century, he describes the logic behind Stalinist “directives”—how contingency and ambiguity are written into them so that any failure can be blamed on anyone for any reason:
The directive must be at once very obscure and very precise: enveloped in general recommendations in such a way as to make it impossible to apply some of its elements without infringing others. It must foresee contradictory eventualities, command definite actions while suggesting various others so as to permit effective repudiation of anyone who might carry them out. (154)

This is precisely the theme of Koestler’s great novel, *Darkness at Noon*. “There was no certainty,” Koestler writes early in the novel, “only the appeal to that mocking oracle they called History, who gave her sentence only when the jaws of the appealer had long since fallen to dust” (10). *I alone can fix it* is easy to say. But the unilateral actions of an unscrupulous dictator have wide-ranging consequences, the majority of which cannot be determined in advance. Even a “democracy” with a system of checks and balances, Arendt warns, isn’t immune from collateral damage down the road: “Yet while the various limitations and boundaries we find in every body politic may offer some protection against the inherent boundlessness of action, they are altogether helpless to offset its second outstanding character: its inherent unpredictability” (*HC* 191). When the “jaws of the appealer” has in fact “fallen to dust,” when history has revealed the fixer to be a charlatan, the consequence, like any other cost under totalitarian rule, ends up socialized. It’s the people who pay. That’s the “end.”

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Koestler’s time served in a Spanish jail under Franco supplied the raw material from which he crafted both *Darkness at Noon* and his memoir, *Dialogue with Death*. But it’s the novel that really explores the broader philosophical problem of ends and means: how an ideology can proliferate, normalize, and become so sedimented as to allow for any
means necessary to achieve “the Party” objective. *Darkness at Noon* was published in English in 1940, in London, where Koestler was living in exile. The protagonist, Rubashov, an aristocratic soldier and Party loyalist, has just been arrested when the novel opens, and is very likely facing death. The novel details not only his physical incarceration but his psychological ascendency to “reason” in the midst of an insane situation. He becomes the proverbial scapegoat, the one whose reason and pragmatism is so pure that it cannot deny the central flaw in its own logic: that an endless goal leads only to corruption, that the eternal “liberator” is nothing but a perpetual tyrannist. The Party had become exactly what it had sought to destroy, and now they wanted him—a lifelong devotee—dead.

When we first meet Koestler’s fallen hero, a Bolshevik of the old guard, now standing accused of treason—an “Article 58”—he is lying on a cot in a dank cell, contemplating the future: a time when, perhaps, the course of history would be methodically “taught by means of tables and statistics, supplemented by such anatomical sections.” Rubashov imagines the following (hyperbolic) scenario: “The teacher would draw on the blackboard an algebraic formula representing the conditions of life of the masses of a particular nation at a particular period: ‘Here, citizens, you see the objective factors which conditioned this historical process’” (12). But Ruboshov had long been harboring doubts, had already realized that history did not run “on rails according to an infallible plan” (21). He had begun to regret, as Benjamin would say, “the politicians’ stubborn faith in in progress, their confidence in their ‘mass basis,’ and finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus” (*Illuminations* 258). This is an allusion to Benjamin’s critique of the Social Democrats of his time whose advocacy for “reified
progress” was, for Benjamin, a nonstarter: the Enlightenment “notion of historical progress, which only recognizes a series of empty, quantitative transitions, the homogenous time of always the same, and whose defining characteristic is the incessant piling up of ‘ruins upon ruins.’” (Wolin 49). Rubashov is no Social Democrat (and the concept of “homogenous time” will be explored in the next chapter), but the point is that he’d been complicit, had for so long been faithful to the machine, and now he’s realizing too late that his compass was broken. Only now was he becoming “aware of the murderous consequences inherent in a line of thought that forces one to admit that all means, provided that they are efficient, are permissible and justified to pursue something defined as an end” (Arendt, HC 229). After years of nothing but loyal service to the Party, Rubashov was now facing immanent death, suspected of conspiring against his fellow conspiratorialists to whom he’d devoted his life. Poetic irony, perhaps.

Most of what we learn about Rubashov we learn through flashbacks. We see him berate a loyal, though insolent, young comrade named Richard, who had the temerity to suggest a reevaluation of the Party’s failing platform. Rubashov explains that individuals may be fallible (except for Stalin, of course) but that history is written and the Party is merely following the script: “The Party is the embodiment of the revolutionary idea in history. History knows no scruples and no hesitation. Inert and unerring, she flows toward her goal” (34). In the very first thesis of his Theses on the Philosophy of History, Benjamin analogizes the traditional “vulgar” Marxist conception of historical materialism to a “puppet” that has rigged the game “to win all the time.” One imagines that intellectuals like Rubashov, raised on Marxist-Leninist doctrine, must have found this idea comforting: historical materialism as a sort of playbook by which history is akin to a
machine leading “unerringly” toward socialism. Had he and his comrades stopped long enough to consider how so many people could stand in the way, why so many people had to die, to achieve an outcome that was “inevitable,” perhaps the flaw in this logic might have revealed itself sooner. But it’s too late for Rubashov now. He spends most of the novel grappling with analytics: where is the flaw? Either I’ve devoted my life to something inherently faulty, or there must be something unaccounted for, some problem with the math. He doesn’t want to believe the former, but, as Arendt explains, he can’t disentangle his past from his current predicament, can’t imagine how, with such “enlightened” thinking, he could have calculated so incompetently: “His past was the movement, the Party; present and future, too, belonged to the Party, were inseparably bound up with its fate; but his past was identical with it. And it was this past that was suddenly put in question” (DaN 46). If every decision he had ever made had been for the “greater good,” then how could he possibly have miscalculated?

This speaks to a sort of “melancholy science” that Adorno muses about in the Dedication to Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life. Adorno wastes no time, doesn’t even wait until the opening chapter to begin dismantling what he perceives to be modernity’s overarching problem: “Means and ends are inverted. A dim awareness of this perverse quid pro quo has still not been eradicated from life. Reduced and degraded essence tenaciously resists the magic that transforms it into a façade” (15). The “perverse quid pro quo” could imply commodity exchange or simply the reduction of all human interaction to quantification; whether we’re talking about “the monstrosity of absolute production” or the horrors of Stalinism, the point is the same: absolute submission to an ideology leads to a “reduced and degraded” life, which only later
reveals itself to be a façade. Rubashov had become so invested in the “endgame” of socialist utopia that he hadn’t realized that he’d missed a crucial piece of the puzzle: that the “eradication of difference” is folly, and that the individual actually matters.

What Adorno has to say in the context of Hegelian totality can easily be applied to Rubashov’s flawed thinking: “In the face of totalitarian unison with which the eradication of difference is proclaimed as a purpose in itself, even part of the social force of liberation may have temporarily withdrawn to the individual sphere” (ibid 18). This is the reason behind Rubashov’s toothaches: the symptoms only emerge when he considers what he calls the “grammatical fiction”:

Although it was supposed to be the person addressed in all monologues, it remained dumb, and its existence was limited to a grammatical abstraction called the ‘first person singular.’ Direct questions and logical meditations did not induce it to speak; its utterances occurred without visible cause and, strangely enough, always accompanied by a sharp attack of toothache. (89)

Putting himself in the shoes of another, engaging in a sustained interior monologue wherein he feels compelled to empathize—such actions are enough to induce the ache, a psychosomatic reaction to Rubashov’s acquired resistance to subjective consciousness.

The metaphor undergirding the novel is of course Rubashov’s real imprisonment: that of his own perverse value system. Koestler and Benjamin, despite their political and philosophical differences (Koestler abandoned Marxism along with any hope of revolutionary redemption) are actually making the same argument. Rubashov is imprisoned, ultimately, by his unwavering commitment to a fatalistic progression of history: “We seem to be faced with a pendulum movement in history, swinging from
absolutism to democracy, from democracy back to absolute dictatorship” (DaN 134, emphasis his). The brand of Marxism that Benjamin espouses is that of man making his own history, “the dialectical interaction of consciousness and the social and natural world” (Marshall 148). What Rubashov believes (or more accurately, what he struggles with) is his reduction of Marxist doctrine to uncritical dogmatism, a consignment of history to an inevitable series of fits and starts, statesmen and autocrats, engendering a passive (Stalinist) allegiance to the “orthodoxy.” Benjamin argues that “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (Illuminations 255). History is not stuck between two ideological modes, as Rubashov would have it, and this is what Koestler (not to mention Solzhenitsyn and Serge) is trying to get across.

This is the primary basis of all cults: once one invests entirely in an absolutist belief system, whatever falls outside of its logic is deemed defective: “If the Party embodied the will of history, then history itself was defective” (DaN 46). This is Rubashov’s initial reaction to his incarceration, his inner turmoil and the physical symptoms it engendered. Darkness at Noon can be read as a 200-page critique on the power of a brainwashed mind, projecting its disease onto objective reality: “All our principles were right, but our results were wrong. This is a diseased century” (47). Solzhenitsyn, for one, concurs. Near the end of the Archipelago, he articulates his oeuvre’s overarching thesis:

This is surely the main problem of the twentieth century: is it permissible merely to carry out orders and commit one’s conscience to someone else’s keeping? Can a man do without ideas of his own about good and evil, and merely derive them
from the printed instructions and verbal orders of his superiors? Oaths! Those solemn pledges pronounced with a tremor in the voice and intended to defend the people against evildoers: see how easily they can be misdirected to the service of evildoers and against the people! (385)

Arendt practically made a career out of tackling this very problem. Her colleagues in critical theory did as well, perhaps to a lesser degree, and there were plenty of others, namely Sartre and Camus, who critiques teleological thinking throughout *The Rebel*: “If it is certain that the kingdom will come, what does time matter? Suffering is never provisional for the man who does not believe in the future. But one hundred years of suffering are fleeting in the eyes of the man who prophesizes, for the hundred and first year, the definitive city” (207). This is probably the scariest thing when it comes to ideologically-driven atrocity: the killers are the ones who believe that they’re making the ultimate sacrifice. Their victims are simply standing in the way, withholding the key to the “definitive city.”

This is certainly one point of agreement for Koestler, Solzhenitsyn, and Serge: that teleological thinking leads to dehumanization and, ultimately, destruction. If the tides of history seem to be heading in the “wrong” direction, the thinking goes, then any kind of course correction is justified. From his earliest writings, Nietzsche could see the destruction on the horizon, even warning about it in his short book, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*: “Historical justice, even when it is practiced truly and with pure intentions, is a terrible virtue because it always undermines the living and brings it to ruin: its judging is always annihilating” (38). By the time we get to Horkheimer and Adorno, the history of humanity is one of regress rather than progress. In
The *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors trace the development of “progressive” thought from magic to myth to metaphysics and finally positivism. But they argue that positivism—reduction of everything to quantifiable “absolutes”—is really just a relapse into myth, another means by which to explain and control the objective world. “For enlightenment,” they argue, “anything that does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion” (3). Of course, the prisoner experiences his objectification on a micro level in the everyday reduction of his being: “[T]he measured subject lands in front of the photographer’s lens. The same indifferent hands raise the subject’s chin, place the back of his skull against a metal stanchion, hand a plate bearing a number on his chest” (Serge, *MiP* 30). As Horkheimer and Adorno put it, “subjectivity [is] itself seemingly abolished and replaced by the operations of the automatic mechanisms of order” (*DE* 23). Perhaps this is another commonality between socialism and fascism, even on an individual level: each party is always on one side of a transaction, gauging the degree to which the other is useful, an asset or a hindrance. It’s always about the future. The moment is simply something to get through; the other party is either a catalyst or an obstacle, nothing in between. Nothing remotely human.

We can see this phenomenon play out quite specifically in an exchange between Rubashov and his interrogator, Ivanov, a former colleague and old friend. Rubashov has just finished explaining to Ivanov that the Party has lost its moral compass: “Everything is buried,” Rubashov says, “the men, their wisdom and their hopes. You killed the ‘We’; you destroyed it” (68). By now Rubashov is separating himself from the pack. The shifting of pronouns is key: when *you* kill *us*, you’re destroying everything: in your attempt to subjugate nature, you’re doing away with man. Benjamin scholar Richard
Wolin, doing a fairly good job of encapsulating Horkheimer and Adorno’s thesis, describes the situation thus: “The moment that the history of domination has always tragically forgotten is that man, too, is part of nature and is therefore ultimately destined to fall victim to his own obsessive logic of coercion and control” (237). It’s as though *Frankenstein* had never been written. Man seems determined, even today, to learn the hard way. This explains why Benjamin, in his *Theses*, argues for what he calls a “materialist historiography,” which he claims is “based on a constructive principle,” instead of historical materialism as it is commonly known. Wolin explains: “[I]n its reliance on the Enlightenment myth of historical progress, historical materialism has remained a prisoner of the same logic it wanted to transcend. For in its Panglossian trust in the *historical necessity of socialism*, it has neglected the *negative, dark, and destructive side of the revolutionary process*” (260-1, his emphasis). This is precisely what Rubashov is at pains to express to the recalcitrant Ivanov: in their effort to eliminate the individual, they destroyed their whole philosophy. “We” became meaningless. Having tried to make the future by burying the past, Bolshevism had sown the seeds of its own demise.

Midway through the novel, Rubashov muses on the “breathing spaces of history,” and how there are times when politicians have the luxury to play more “fairly” (or at least appear to). But during history’s “critical turning points,” he stresses, “there is no other rule possible than the old one, that the end justifies the means” (78). This, of course, is the problem that undergirds the novel, a philosophy so seemingly unshakable that Rubashov must painstakingly exhaust every other possibility, no matter how absurd, before finally succumbing to the undeniable. The novel explores the basic contradiction
very clearly, and it plays out on a generational level. Rubashov and his old friend Ivanov, now serving as his antagonist, are part of the “old guard”: “Worn by the years of illegal struggle, eaten by the damp of the prison walls, between which they spent half their youth” (177). As seasoned soldiers during the Party’s inception, they’re privy to its hardscrabble beginnings, coauthors of its propaganda. As such, they can recall the marketing to the masses and the whitewashing of “old histories.” That they’ve spent their lives peddling bullshit is the subtext of their numerous dialogues. While Ivanov remains wary of admitting that the Party has strayed and that the masses have lost faith, Rubanov, despite being unwilling to recant the basic philosophy, can’t ignore the obvious: “We whip the groaning masses of the country towards a theoretical future happiness, which only we can see” (130). It’s sort of like a Ponzi scheme with promises instead of payments: at least with the latter, immoral as it may be, some do see dividends. But when compensation comes only in the form of a promised future predicated on lies, the lie just gets handed down perpetually. Happiness becomes something eternally deferred. Benjamin explains: “[O]ur image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption” (Illuminations 254).

Bloodied hands are not happy ones. At some point, everything that was “sacrificed,” everyone who suffered and died in the “struggle” for a brighter future—that debt has to be made right, the ones who paid the ultimate price have to be redeemed. We cited in the previous chapter the “temporal index,” the “weak, Messianic power” to which the past has a claim. Is this not what Rubishov is saying? We whip the groaning masses of the country towards a theoretical future happiness. But whip lashes leave scars. And these scars are handed down.
But Koestler knows his characters. He realizes that since Rubishov and Ivanov are equally matched intellectually, then the one with the better argument should prevail, thus Ivanov allows his weakness to seep into the interrogation sessions (or so the brass has determined), and the old Bolshevik is dispatched. He is replaced by the robotic young Gletkin (who will be fleshed out more fully in the following chapter). During one of his propagandistic rants in defense of Party policy, Gletkin attempts to rationalize the mass murder of intractable peasants, for history had no time to lose: “In other countries, the peasants had one or two hundred years to develop the habit of industrial precision and the handling of machines. Here they had only ten years. If we didn’t sack them and shoot them for every trifle, the whole country would come to a standstill” (183). In other words, *Let’s hurry up and manufacture history before anyone notices*. Before the peasant sees the “flash,” identifies the “moment of danger.” Perhaps Benjamin’s clearest description of this phenomenon comes not from the *Theses*, but *The Arcades Project*: “It’s not that what is past casts light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill” (462). Should the whole country “come to a standstill” as Gletkin fears, what then? He means this literally, economically, but we sense something salient in his paranoia, something almost...mystical. Something he can’t comprehend.

This is a fairly significant (if unintentional) reveal, for several reasons. First, Gletkin’s disclosure echoes Horkheimer and Adorno’s entire thesis—that humanity has “progressed” in its ability to dominate the external environment at the expense of subjugating itself: “What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to
dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts” (*DE* 2). The more utilitarian our thinking becomes, the more we reduce the world, and everything in it, to its “asset value.” Secondly, Gletkin’s rant essentially encapsulates means-ends thinking: we can no longer relate to any object *qua* object: we judge “value” based solely on what it might yield; unless we can *speculate* on it, the moment is meaningless. And lastly, if such a “standstill” were to occur—should the dialectical process be put on pause—a fissure may open to the alert, revolutionary eye: a “moment of danger” as Benjamin puts it. “It is this astonishment,” argues Benjamin scholar Michael W. Jennings, “that leads us to reflect upon our historical condition and that potentially leads to the erasure of the condition of oppression” (209). An “astonished” peasant, Gletkin realizes, is an awakened one: a dangerous one. Serge describes this from the point of view of the oppressed as the “poisoned moment”: “A familiar obsession begins to filter through your veins. You can feel it in all your limbs. Memory again becomes a torture” (*MiP* 137). In another passage on the dialectical image, Benjamin maps for us its positionality: “Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is a cesura in the moment of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest” (*AP* 475).

Is this not what Gletkin appears to be afraid of? The shortcomings of forced collectivization exposed, the peasant experiencing “a cesura in the moment of thought.” This seems eerily similar to something that Koestler reports when he’s “dialoging with death,” when his liquidation seems most imminent: “Now I know that an inexorable law prevails: increasing awareness of time slows down in pace, complete awareness of time
would bring it to a standstill. Only in death does the present become reality; time freezes” (*DwD* 151). This is what Benjamin struggles so hard to articulate, something that, by its very nature, mere words cannot capture. The harnessing of the flash in a moment of danger, the moment at which the *moment* reveals itself as a *thing*—neither a temporal evolvement of the past, nor a precursor to the future—“not progression but image, suddenly emergent.”

Dialectical images, like monads, are meant to awaken one to truths hitherto unseen, histories submerged in service of oppressive narratives. They cannot be planned; the Proustian influence on Benjamin’s thinking cannot be denied: “[W]ith our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting” (*Illuminations* 202). Dialectical images resist the “ornaments of forgetting” that trauma implants; they incite an irruption or “shock” for those who are ready: on the cusp of revolt, in the throes of starvation or on the precipice of death. What makes “historicism” fallacious, according to Benjamin, is its construction post facto: the myth of progress is not History, but rather an inheritance handed down by the victors. Meanwhile the “human flotsam,” as Serge describes it, is simply washed away. It’s no coincidence that the protagonists of these texts (Ivan Denisovich, Rubashov, Serge’s nameless narrator) are all nobodies, the detritus of a failed revolutionary ideology: (contingent) ghosts that continue to haunt the present—these may just be the keys to evading a calamitous future. In the dialectical image, the contradictions, nurtured and concealed by the dominant narrative, are exposed. In the words of Benjamin scholar Rolf Tiedemann, “Through the immobilizing of dialectic, the historical ‘victors’ have their accounts with history canceled, and all pathos is shifted toward salvation of the
oppressed” (*AP* 943). There comes a “frozen moment,” claims author William Burroughs, “when everyone sees what is on the end of his fork.” Benjamin’s frozen dialectics is Burroughs’ naked lunch. *Enough. The jig is up.*

Benjamin’s theory bears a similarity to the genealogical method preferred by Nietzsche and Foucault: “[To] recognize today’s life, today’s forms, in the life and in the apparently secondary, lost forms of an epoch” (*AP* 458). Unearthing the hidden histories that might have been, exposing the lies of the present by exhuming the bodies of the past. The notion that civilization is built upon lies and barbarities was evident even in Nietzsche’s earliest work. In *The Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche argues against what he calls the “tyranny of the actual”—the modern inclination to believe that we’ve arrived late to the party, that history has unfolded at our feet, and thus “men had to become what men are and nothing else”:

> For you may talk of whatever virtue you want, of justice, generosity, courage, the wisdom and compassion of man—everywhere he is virtuous only because he was outraged by that blind power of facts, by the tyranny of the actual, and subjects himself to laws which are not laws of those fluctuations of history. *He always swims against the historical waves,* whether he controls his passion as the nearest stupid fact of his existence or whether he commits himself to honesty while all around him lies spin their glittering nets. (48-9, my emphasis)

This “religious” belief in teleology produces what Nietzsche calls “yes men,” those who bow down obsequiously to history’s laws, its “rational necessity.” Meanwhile the “real man of virtue”—if I may allow Benjamin to pick up the thread, “dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to *brush history against the grain*”
(Illuminations 256-7, my emphasis). “But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, though events that may be separated from it by thousands of years” (ibid 263). No connection between the past and the present (totalitarianism of the twentieth century, this wave of election denialism in the twenty-first), has anything to do with determinism or some linear-evolutionary course of events. It’s not the historicist “yes men” who will lead us into redemption, but the “real” historians who swim against the historical waves: “Only the historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (Illuminations 255).

For if anyone is a position—at this time or any other—to “brush history against the grain,” it is the political prisoner. “We formed an unbelievable island,” Serge writes, “cut off from the movement of history” (MiP 152). Late in his career, Nietzsche would argue more definitively for the interpretation of history as a genealogical endeavor (and not, as some have misread him, for the overpowering of the weak by the strong as an historical inevitability). He writes in The Genealogy of Morals:

The origin of the existence of a thing and its final utility, its practical application and incorporation of a system of ends are toto coelo opposed to each other—everything, anything, which exists and which prevails anywhere, will always be put to new purposes by a force superior to itself, will be commandeered afresh, will be turned and transformed to new uses…a new interpretation and adjustment, which must necessarily obscure or absolutely extinguish the subsisting ‘meaning’ and ‘end.’” (EN 250)
Certain narratives throughout history have dominated, not because of their explanatory power, “but rather because its creators and subsequent adherents have succeeded in suppressing competing explanations and ensnconcing theirs as truth” (Jennings 50). The texts under discussion represent “a corrective historiography, an attempt to overcome previous ‘barbarism’ and replace it with a concern for the oppressed” (ibid 51). This is what Serge means when he says that men in prison form an “unbelievable island, cut off from the movement of history.” What Jennings has to say about Benjamin’s texts could easily apply to these other writers: “These texts largely eschew the sort of truth claims that speak from traditional historical narratives, replacing them with the hope that truth might arise from the often violent collision of a past that has been recuperated in bits and pieces and a present badly in need of insight into what has been” (50-1). Such texts, we must remember, were never meant to see the light of day. As prison historian Michael Meranze reminds us, “The successful terror of the prison would depend on public ignorance of its reality….This strategy presumed that a diffuse horror had greater effects than a singular, if striking, fear” (133). But it is precisely this “striking” fear that these authors, including Benjamin, intend to illuminate. These “unbelievable islanders” would not allow their lives to be papered over by the victors’ palimpsest.

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“According to what I know about history,” argues Gletkin during his interrogation of Rubashov, “I see that mankind could never do without scapegoats” (183). If we didn’t sack them and shoot them for every trifle, the whole country would come to a standstill. Above all, the dialectical process has to be kept from freezing, has to appear seamless, with no hint of a wizard behind the (iron) curtain. One can be rational, practical, exacting,
and even maniacal, but never doubting, never reflecting, never wavering, never really human. Solzhenitsyn argues that the silencing of suspected oppositionists, who seemed to be everywhere, became Stalin’s primary objective:

The whole system of oppression elaborated in his reign was based on keeping malcontents apart, preventing them from reading each other’s eyes and discovering how many of them there were; instilling it into all of them, even into the most dissatisfied, that no one was dissatisfied except for a few doomed individuals, blindly vicious and spiritually bankrupt. (GA 388)

“You know of the dissatisfaction among the peasantry,” Gletkin implores, “which has not yet learnt to understand the sense of the sacrifices imposed on it. In a war which may only be a few months away, such currents can lead to a catastrophe” (193). As though one weren’t already underway.

The “catastrophe” in this case would be the fall of the Party, not the slaughter of innocent civilians. For the latter, Benjamin conjures the image of the “angel of history”:

“His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Illuminations 257). In this analogy, it is Gletkin, arguing for the liquidation of untold numbers of innocent people, who perceives each senseless death as merely another link in the “chain of events” that will lead to utopia. For him, this is advancement. Rubashov is increasingly seeing things as the angel would: “wreckage upon wreckage” collapsing into a single catastrophe, irredeemable and impossible to bury. “It would be more in accordance with our ideas to tell the people the truth,” counters Rubashov,
“instead of populating the world with *saboteurs* and devils” (184). This is the “storm,” Benjamin says, that “we call progress.”

But Benjamin’s angel is no absolutist. The “one single catastrophe” isn’t reductionist thinking; it’s an accumulation of historical debris, those “ruins upon ruins” we cited earlier. The catastrophe, according to Benjamin, is not something that lurks around the corner, but something that already exists: “That things are ‘status quo’ *is* the catastrophe” (*AP* 473). Benjamin’s angel, argues Tiedemann, simply “sees more than others do, and sees more correctly. He penetrates appearances which imprison common ideas of history” (“HM or PM” 75). Aptly put, since the authors under analysis were all imprisoned, not for their actions, but for their ideas. In principle, Horkheimer points out, “anyone could be there. The crime that leads to the camps is committed every day in everyone’s thoughts” (*TAS* 9). “And it was simply stated,” Solzhenitsyn reminds us, “that any measures and means employed were good, since they were being used for a lofty purpose” (*GA* 44, his emphasis). And such “lofty purposes,” always seem to be in “conformity with natural law” (ibid 77). But if systematic and normalized barbarism were in any way “natural,” then why the need for the massive propaganda campaigns, the NKVD recruitment initiatives, the Hitler Youth rallies? Koestler predicts that the guilty “will be tried by History.” Then he adds, “But that will not make the dead arise” (*DwD* 41). Possibly the most salient passage from Koestler’s memoir comes not from his own prose, but from a “kite” tossed into his cell from a fellow prisoner. It reads, in part, “Dear comrade foreigner, we three are also condemned to death, and they will shoot us tonight or tomorrow. But you may survive; and if you ever come out you must tell the world all about those who kill us…” (ibid 133-4). The note was signed ‘Three Republican
Militiamen.’ Two were shot that night, nameless scapegoats; the political prisoner is entirely expendable. “For however real he may be in his relations to others,” argues Adorno, “he is, considered absolutely, a mere abstraction” (MM 159). A means to an end.

Richard Wolin does a fairly good job of summarizing the problem:

[T]he measures of self-denial and repression which the species was forced to endure for the sake of individuating itself vis-à-vis the urhistorical world in which natural alienation reigned unchecked were of necessity so harsh that once the initial objective of raising mankind above the level of utter thralldom to nature was achieved, the ultimate telos of the process—the pacification of the struggle for existence, the creation of a harmonious and free social environment—was lost sight of, and the means to this goal, the methods of rational calculation and control, were enthroned as ends in themselves.” (267)

Let us not forget that all of this was predicated, ostensibly, on obtaining happiness for future generations. But this liberalist obsession with progress, Adorno argues, “barters happiness away to the apparatus, the sworn enemy of happiness, whose only goal is self-preservation, even where happiness is proclaimed to be the goal” (CM 151). So what if we have to put our thumb on the scale for a while; we do it for the future. The titles of Koestler’s and Serge’s novels, Darkness at Noon and Midnight in the Century, both set in a Stalinist hellscape, bear similarity with good reason. “The revolution,” argues Horkheimer, “which was a vocation on the same level of a science, led to jail or Siberia” (TAS 16). Darkness at noon or midnight in the century—both imply the “fatalism by which incomprehensible death was sanctioned.” The authors of The Dialectic of Enlightenment use similar imagery when describing the unwinnable war between nature
and culture: “The noonday panic fear in which nature suddenly appeared to humans as an all-encompassing power has found its counterpart in the panic which is ready to break out an any moment today: human beings expect the world, which is without issue, to be set ablaze by a universal power which they themselves are and over which they are powerless” (22). The modern Prometheus. If Mary Shelley could see it coming, there had to have been others. Serge, the consummate jailhouse epiphanist, was able to reflect on it only years later:

As to [totalitarianism] we were blind. We revolutionaries, who aimed to create a new society, ‘the broadest democracy of the workers,’ had unwittingly, with our hands, constructed the most terrifying State machine conceivable; and when, with revulsion, we realized the truth, this machine, driven by our friends and comrades, turned on us and crushed us. (MR 380)

It's somewhat ironic: that positivist framework, predicated on logic and bolstered by technological prowess, devolves into a totalitarian nightmare whereby hope for the future means that, to borrow from a great Russian novelist, “everything is permitted.” The present becomes meaningless. Arendt explains: “The trouble lies in the nature of the categorical framework of ends and means, which changes every attained end immediately into the means to a new end, thereby, as it were, destroying meaning wherever it is applied, until in the midst of the seemingly unending utilitarian questioning, What is the use of…?” (BPaF 80).

When the only point of the present is the pursuit of a “better” future, our very existence becomes an idea that will never materialize because what is will always be subordinated to what could be. Becoming becomes everything, being becomes nothing.
For Benjamin, this is precisely what ails us: “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history” (*Illuminations* 262). The darkroom door is left open, light overwhelms the latent image; we’ve ruined the present and mortgaged our future.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argues that totalitarian regimes practice a lawfulness that defies legality: “Totalitarian lawfulness, defying legality and pretending to establish the direct reign of justice on earth, exercises the law of History or of Nature without translating it into standards of right and wrong for individual behavior” (462). If we’re simply being swept along by an uncontrollable (historical/natural) force, then it’s incumbent upon us to swim with the tide. What else can we do? “If lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination” (ibid 464). This might be the most obvious aporia at the heart of both Nazism and Stalinism: if we’re all just pawns in a predetermined game of historical progression, then what are we fighting for? If lack of freedom was in the cards to begin with, then what’s all the fuss about? To undermine our capacity for “action”—the third level of the *vita activa*—is the whole point. Eliminate free thinking, let me handle everything. *I alone can fix it.*

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt muses about a future society wherein the mere concept of consciousness has, once we’ve committed ourselves to a life of endlessly deferred happiness, become entirely superfluous: “The fulfillment of the wish…like the fulfillment of wishes in fairy tales, comes at a moment when it can only be self-defeating…. [T]his society does no longer know of those higher and more meaningful
activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won” (5). Simply put, when utility becomes the standard by which we evaluate our every move, when the only activities in which we engage are those which are meant to yield the highest “value,” there comes a time when we have to ask ourselves, what is the point? What is the use of…utility?
Gone. – I’m pacing the yard outside the house on Bright Street in Northampton, working up the nerve to call my father. It’s warm. I’m coatless. I could do this all day.

But we need to have the talk. I’ve been procrastinating. I know my dad; he won’t make the first move. I have to thank him for the money anyway; that’s my Trojan horse. I take a deep breath and dial 727. The light beats in my chest turn to those thumps: the ones I associate with anxiety, bullying, confrontation.

I’m relieved when he answers. I didn’t want to leave a message, prolong this, plus it soothes me to hear his voice: warm and crackly with age, like an old record. Mellowed out at seventy-five, he seems content, and contentedness had never come easily to my dad. We have that in common. And then the divorce, his retirement, the move: all within such a short period. Everyone was concerned, including my mom. Maybe even her especially.

The small talk goes well, so I decide to regale him with the story behind my living situation. He knows that my brother Michael, his own divorce pending, has lost access to his house—a judgment that was handed down on the same day I left California—but my father is unaware of the effect that this has had on me.

I was permitted to leave Los Angeles on the condition that I continue formal probation in Hampshire County, living with my brother, a reputable citizen and homeowner. I was to check in monthly and find legitimate work, like any local offender, but now I had to explain to Hampshire County Probation that the housing, my transfer’s lynchpin, had fallen through. I contacted Chief Foley from my childhood home, pled my case. Foley was unmoved. He gave me twenty-four hours to land an address in his county—or else. That meant revocation of the transfer, and my LA-based PO had warned
me in no uncertain terms (his final words were *Fuck this up and I’ll hang you*). I repacked some things and headed for the door, brushing past my mother on the way.

“What if you don’t find anything,” she said, “where will you go?” Back to jail, I replied. There was no time to bullshit her. I drove straight to Northampton with the goal of targeting tattooed, wayward-looking women on Main Street. I realized the ridiculousness of that, but it was too late for Craigslist. That I succeeded can only be attributed to luck coupled with blind determination: that zone in which you simply cannot fail. A young woman named Teresa took me in, a situation that would sour soon enough, but I could tell Foley that I was living there, on Bright Street.

Dad likes my story, which I tell comically, leaving out the part about mom’s despair. He laughs easily these days, and in stark contrast to when I was young, he’s very attentive. He no longer talks over me. I thank him for the money, a much-needed two grand that helped tremendously with the settling process. I’ll get it back to you as soon as I can, I tell him. He rebuffs the offer. “You’ll inherit it anyway,” he says, “why wait another ten years when you need it now?” I tease him about his optimism, reminding him that he’s already outlived his own father by several years. Again, he laughs.

I wait for the next lull, take a breath, and brace myself. No amount of mindlessness or impulsivity could explain a drug business five years running, so I make no excuses. I just explain that I did what I did willingly, recklessly, methodically. I paint broad strokes, sparing him extraneous details. No point in defending my product line. That I sold only what I used, eschewing heroin and other opiates, probably wouldn’t seem salient to him, I assume. To him drugs are drugs. I do explain, however, that while I violated the law, I broke no moral code of my own. Everyone involved was a consenting
adult and no one was ever coerced, cajoled, etc. It’s very important to me that he understand, “I never meant to hurt anyone,” and though I know how flimsy that sounds, I say it anyway. He stops me, tells me that he gets it: the temptation, the lifestyle appeal. He even uses the word “glamorous,” which I’m sure I’d never heard him say. I begin to realize that my nervousness had nothing to do with any perceived disapproval. It was about my father’s true feelings, and how I’d have to live up to them now.

Ever since his boys had grown, he’d cherished every moment he could spend with us, in person, on the phone, and the divorce had only intensified that. Here I am throwing myself on his mercy, and all he wants is for me to feel better. As determined as I am to repent, I feel consoled, so I give in to it. “I just didn’t know,” I say. “The sales thing wasn’t happening, and then this opportunity comes along.” Again, he tries to comfort me, tells me that it’s okay. Now I’m the one talking over him. My new job (restaurant, kitchen), the writing I’ve been doing, the possibility of grad school. I’ll make things right, I promise! Then I feel the tightening in my throat. I’m trying to keep from breathing—no, I’m trying to keep from crying. “One day,” I say, “I swear I’ll make you—” and my voice cracks on “proud.” Then the tears.

I can hear my father choking up. His breathing labored, he struggles to tell me that he’s proud already, that he always has been. We’re both crying freely now, yet somehow I can’t resist appealing to his manliness, for he ought to know: his boy was no punk. “No one fucked with me in jail, dad. And the cops didn’t break me either.” Again, he tells me that he’s proud, that I handled myself well, the way he would have. “You were always a good boy, James.”
Now I know. This man, the one I’ve wanted so badly to please my whole life, the one I’ve always suspected of having to accept my existence post facto—he loves me regardless. And he always has.

That would’ve been September or October of ’09, whenever I got around to making the call. But I know that mom called in November. I was headed home from the gym, I think, but I was definitely going south on King St. She asked if I was sitting down. I said I was driving, which answered her question in the literal sense, I suppose. Actually, mom, I’m standing. On the edge of a cliff. Teetering. That might’ve made a difference, who knows? You can’t blame someone in shock. “Your father had a heart attack,” she said. “He’s gone.”
CHAPTER 9

THIS STORM WE CALL PROGRESS, PART 3: MACHINIC APPENDAGES

In part one we discussed the malignant normality that characterizes the twentieth century, the sowing of ideological seeds that germinated into mass death and destruction. We then moved on to a discussion of ends and means, essentially the philosophical seedlings that those ideologies yielded, the material conditions and their accompanying rationales. We will now discuss the role of consciousness during this time period, the atomization of society and the evolution of individuals and institutions into appendages. Something that Adorno writes at the opening of *Minima Moralia* speaks to this “process”: “What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own” (15). Our very lives, according to Adorno, have become subordinate to the machine, mere appendages to the process that we ourselves put into motion. Our very own spawn of Frankenstein. A diseased modernity accompanied by a fragmented or diminishing consciousness is explored in depth in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, wherein Horkheimer and Adorno discuss the “liquidation of conscience” in light of the “individual’s insistent conformity to regulations”:

The soul, as the possibility of guilt aware of itself, decays. Conscience is deprived of objects, since individuals’ responsibility for themselves and their dependents is replaced—although still under the moral title—by their mere *performance for the apparatus*. The internal conflict of drives, in which the agency of conscience is
formed, can no longer be worked through. . . [T]he individual identifies himself or herself promptly and directly with the stereotyped scales of values. (164, my emphasis)

Progress, Adorno explains in *Minima Moralia*, has a dual nature. Concomitant with the potential for freedom is the reality of oppression whereby men “make common cause with the world against themselves…their own conversion into appendages of machinery is for them a mirage of closeness (156). The collapsing of individuality into conformity masquerades as a coming-together; but in reality, it induces a mass numbness—or, as Benjamin would say, the “acedia, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly” (*Illuminations* 256). Acedia implies both the apathy and the numbness that threatens to overtake the prisoner: this understandable melancholy in the face of the seeming omnipotence of fate. “The man on the street betrays the symptoms of this fate no less than the worker on the assembly line,” claims Benjamin scholar Richard Wolin, “the behavior of both has become strictly regimented, stripped of its individuality, and rendered homogenous” (233). Victor Serge dramatizes this distress as it overwhelms one of *Midnight of the Century*’s central characters: “There is nothing left but our defeat, firmly accepted since it must be….And for the moment the dialectic of history has placed us under the wheel” (121). Nothing to be done: entire institutions, which are nothing but aggregated individuals, submit to the existing order, perform for the apparatus, become an appendage.

It is this abstract instrumental rationality that Serge chronicles in his first novel. “The mechanical rhythm of each day,” he writes, “repeated ad infinitum, leads to an

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53 This, we’ll recall, was the feeling that Gletkin was hoping to induce in the peasantry, so that it would become unnecessary for the soldiers to “sack them and shoot them for every trifle.” They just needed to “despair of grasping and holding the genuine historical image” as it comes to a standstill.
almost painlessly autonomized existence. The bell sets off the same movements, at the same precise instant, in six hundred prisoners. Soon each man has internalized these movements” \((\text{MiP} 106)\). Readers familiar with Foucault’s \textit{Discipline and Punish} will immediately recognize the similarity: directly after the raw depiction of an eighteenth-century execution (“Damiens the regicide”), Foucault provides the modernized disciplinary time-table: “At the first drum roll, the prisoners must rise and dress in silence, as the supervisor opens the cell doors. At the second drum roll, they must be dressed and make their beds” \((6)\). Replace the drum roll with an almost deafening alarm and nothing much has changed. The prison is but one appendage to a larger disciplinary apparatus, the one tasked with “the grinding of our souls in the gears of the great Nighttime Institution,” as Solzhenitsyn aptly puts it. Serge, with one of his many striking ruminations, captures the “mechanized madness” of the modern prison machine:

\begin{quote}
Life there is a kind of mechanized madness; everything in it seems to have been conceived in a spirit of mean calculation how best to enfeeble, stupefy, and numb the prisoner, and poison him with an inexpressible bitterness; his return to normal life must evidently be made quite impossible….From this class professional criminals are recruited. \((\text{Memoirs} 45-6)\)
\end{quote}

A fairly prescient encapsulation of Foucault’s overall thesis that none of this should be considered arbitrary, that these interlinking cogs are simply too well-situated, that the true purpose of the prison is “not intended to eliminate offenses, but rather to distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them” \((\text{DP} 271)\). To make of them appendages, in service of the larger disciplinary apparatus.
Prison is also the appendage that, while arguably wreaking the most havoc on both the individual and societal levels, enjoys the highest degree of plausible deniability. Nearly anything can happen behind its walls. For prisoners with a release date somewhere down the line, time is a linear, chronological snail-crawl: the ticking clock is all they have, their only hope. Time for them is empty, homogenous, a series of interchangeable instants, indistinct, ephemeral. It’s a nullity that weighs upon them: “When alone, Elkin would age suddenly, frown, and, before sitting or lying down, pace from one corner to the other, hands clasped behind his back. Emptiness. Stone. Space. Heaviness. Do you think you understand these words? Elkin monologued in a crushing silence. There’s nothing—and it weighs tons” (Serge, MC 65).

Any given hour is equivalent to any other; time feels meaningless. This is Benjamin’s conception of “homogenous, empty time,” wherein the lives of the oppressed—whether under Hitler’s nationalism or Stalin’s state capitalism—are not only expendable, but eradicable: “[T]he continuity of ‘what really happened’ could establish itself” (Žižek, SO 154). Resistance may seem futile in the present, but Benjamin’s thesis is that even if justice fails, it may be redeemed by some future movement (unless the victors win so absolutely that the past is lost). Benjamin argues for a conception of time where the present is not separate from the past, no “points” or gaps. Rather, the present is “pregnant” with the past, an accumulation—“one single catastrophe”—wherein nothing is ever truly lost.

In his introduction to Serge’s *Midnight in the Century*, Richard Greeman describes the author as “both an activist and an independent critical thinker whose
political involvements evolved from anarchism through syndicalism, Bolshevism, and Trotskyism to a kind of socialist humanism” (viii). Which is a way of saying that he made plenty of enemies along the way, serving time in prisons all over Europe under both fascist and socialist regimes. Unlike Solzhenitsyn and Koestler, Serge never denounced socialism, for he never equated those who corrupted it with the purity of its concept: he was a materialist who, despite the brutality of the conditions to which he was subjected, never allowed himself to become embittered. His expulsion from Russia predated Solzhenitsyn’s by some thirty years. Unlike Solzhenitsyn, Serge wrote considerably more than he published; several of his manuscripts were confiscated by various authorities and never saw the light of day—to him, just another occupational hazard: “They have shot all the men who made the greatness of those times: it is natural that they should kill the works in which that greatness was reflected” (ibid xi).

Serge’s biographer, Bill Marshall, in describing Serge’s oeuvre, calls it “literature of resistance, as the product of an irreducible and therefore, ultimately free consciousness; the need to communicate and bear witness,” and later, “there is the recurring pattern of the exploration of the effects of a dramatic historical crisis on the lives of a group of individuals” (63, 98). The writer and the subject matter should be read “not as discrete entities, but as part of a collective, historical phenomenon of becoming” (ibid 74). Serge is the type of author whose work “come[s] into conflict with the defenders of the status quo” (ibid). Of the three authors under study, Serge is the one who most embodies Benjamin’s concept of the Messianic. Greeman, in his introduction, describes Serge’s idea of the “Message”—a chapter in Midnight in the Century—that mirrors Benjamin’s concept of “weak, Messianic power”: “What happened once can
happen again. Others will succeed where we have failed. The next wave (or the one after
that) will reach the shore. As Serge puts it in *Birth of Our Power*, “Nothing is ever lost”
(xxi). The characters in a Serge novel, particularly the protagonists, occupy a precarious
space within the machine. Unlike Shukov, the determined albeit dimwitted zek, and
Rubashov, the deluded and glib Bolshevik, Serge’s protagonists are, if somewhat inept,
the most self-aware: “The authorities know what they’re doing when they throw us in
jail,” claims the Elder, one of Serge’s ensemble characters. “We’re all poor slobs, that’s
the saddest part of this whole story” (*MC* 28).

In *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, Serge describes his empathic inclinations in terms
of consciousness within the collective—not collective consciousness, but consciousness
of the fact that the individual is only as strong as the environment he helps create:

Individual existences were of no interest to me—particularly my own—except by
virtue of the great ensemble of life whose particles, more or less endowed with
consciousness, are all that we ever are. And so the form of the classic novel
seemed to me impoverished and outmoded, centering as it does upon a few beings
artificially detached from the world….My first novel had no central character; its
subject was not myself, nor this or that person, but simply men and prison. (263)

This novel, *Men in Prison*, opens with the “interpellation” of the narrator: “A voice
hailed me….The man was already beside me; his dark eyes looked me over coolly. He
pronounced the formula: ‘In he name of His Honor the Civil Governor…’ Another ran
up. The street suddenly seemed to darken. It closed in on me. The moment!” (25). Rote,
spot-on, and intimately subjectifying, “the practical telecommunication of hailings is such

54 From Benjamin’s *Theses*: “A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and
minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be
regarded as lost for history” (*Illuminations* 254).
that they hardly ever miss their man” (Althusser 48). A precise, machinic operation. The novel’s first chapter, “Arrest,” is followed by the next operative phase, “The Lock Up.” Here we see Serge being subjected to a series of “silent manipulations,” whereby the “automatons” relieve him of his personal effects, poke and prod him like a specimen being dissected: “They don’t notice me at all. They ignore me. For this man who, with three rapid, deft movements, stretches my forearm out on a kind of short measuring rod, I don’t exist. There is nothing in front of him but a forearm, so many inches long, bearing this or that peculiarity” (MiP 30).

This reminds us of Foucault’s detached, almost sterile description of the “prison factory” where “it is always the body that is at issue—the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission” (DP 25). It’s a common enough trope in prison literature, the reduction of the human form to peculiarities and particulars,” the atomization of the body as a means of depersonalizing the subject. From Koestler’s memoir: “For the third time I went through the procedure of having my particulars noted, my person searched and my finger prints taken. The demeanor of the officials made one feel one was not in a prison, but in an income-tax office in the midst of a group of polite and slightly bored clerks” (DwD 94). Even these “bureaucrat scribblers” suffer the effects of the apparatus, dimmed brains and bloated bodies: “[T]hey are all thick-set, their bodies grown fat from lack of exercise. Two types of faces: one ruddy, wine-soaked; the other livid and bloated, stamped by the murky grayness of the prison bureau” (MiP 32). What Serge has to say about the mechanistic handling of the inmates could apply just as easily to the cops, their gears rotating on a slightly different axis: “The prison machine sweeps these bits of human flotsam along from one
compartment to another” (31). No cog in the machine escapes the debilitating effects of the total apparatus. Notice how Serge (without mixing metaphors) rehumanizes the prisoners while retaining the image of the apparatus through which they are swept: “I think of grains of sand sifting through a complicated, extremely dirty sieve, and falling deeper with every instant into sordid obscurity” (33). A nature-based metaphor for his comrades, a (dirty) mechanical one for the machine. In this way, those grains of sand become the means by which to understand the desert; one extrapolates from them a sense of the debilitating totality.

This seemingly interminable series of “ritual operations” continues with roll call, standard enough for inmate reception, but Serge seizes the opportunity to rehumanize an otherwise nameless, faceless crowd of sordid souls: “I find myself interested each time by the different tone of the voices answering, ‘Here’: stifled by physical fear; hurried with that special haste of the bashful, who are somehow always a little late; low, lingering, coming out almost reluctantly; nonchalant, among the old-timers” (34). Even this mixed group is all of a piece: the image strewn together with commas and semicolons, no full stops, a heterogeneous collective. Closing out the chapter, Serge narrates the aftermath of a strange but familiar sound, a “soggy thud” followed by a “strange cry.” With machinelike precision, we hear “the sound of guards wearing boots and the muffled, padding tread of trustees on the cleanup squad” (36). A prisoner had taken a dive, so to speak, from the “third gallery.” Further down the same page, Serge muses on the use of the familiar tu amongst the guards and inmates in Spanish prisons. What would seem to be an odd juxtaposition is soon clarified: “Guards and inmates live the same life on both sides of the same bolted door. Policemen and crooks keep the same company, sit on the
same barstools, sleep with the same whores in the same furnished rooms. They mold each other like two armies fighting with complementary methods of attack and defense on a common terrain” (37). And later: “The irrevocable condemnation which weighs down the poor oppresses [the guards] more heavily than it does most of us” (139).

For guard and inmate alike are mere appendages to the same machine, part of the “manipulated collective” that makes up what Horkheimer and Adorno call the “administered world”: “Each human being has been endowed with a self of his or her own, different from all the others, so that it could all the more surely be made the same” (DE 9). Or the line that Benjamin borrows from Journal des débats for his Arcades Project: “every manufacturer lives in his factory like a plantation owner among his slaves” (13). Rank and file guards, Serge reminds us, “live inside with us…. [T]hey spend two thirds of their lives inside these walls” (MiP 139). One can only imagine the effect of such working conditions on the human psyche. As society grows increasingly atomized, the individual continues to erode; personalities blur into emergent conformities. Proletarians take government posts for lack of anything better. In an aphorism called “Fish in Water” from Minima Moralia, Adorno muses on these confused and complicit “agents and go-betweens”: “They are the nice folk, the good mixers liked by all, the just, humanely excusing all meanness and scrupulously proscribing any non-standard impulses as sentimental” (26). Koestler seems to capture the whole of this phenomenon in a glance that comes his way from one of the Civil Guards at a police station during processing: “In it was expressed an entire human philosophy of shame, resignation and apathy. ‘The world is like that,’ he seemed to be saying, ‘and neither I nor you will ever change it’” (DwD 56). Time collapses in the image, pregnant with implication.
In a chapter from his first novel called “Architecture,” Serge describes just that: the edifice, itself subordinate to the larger economic structure, “capitalist society [being] unlike the absolute monarchies of olden times, so limited in their real power” (MiP 42). Here the overt absolutism of the prior mode of production serves to clarify the covert totality of the modern one. With “total subordination of its design to its function,” the modern prison becomes simply another appendage, a mere organ of the total body. “From the center of the hub,” Serge says, “a single man can keep his eye on the whole prison without difficulty, and his glance can ferret into the most remote corners. Maximum ease of surveillance is ensured with a minimum of personnel” (42). We recognize this, of course, from Foucault’s description of Bentham’s panopticon (again, decades before Foucault had made it famous). But it's the final lines of the chapter that resonate most: “Modern prisons are imperfectible, since they are perfect. There’s nothing left but to destroy them” (MiP 43). In other words, replacement of the “crenelated castle” of old—the “fortress of yesteryear”—with the “Carcel Model” can hardly be considered true progression. From the slingshot to the atom bomb. Benjamin notes that “Barbarism lurks in the very concept of culture—as the concept of a fund of values which is considered independent not, indeed, of the production process in which these values originated, but of the one in which they survive” (AP 467-8). Like some sort of slush fund from which we continually deposit and withdraw without ever gaining anything. GIGO, as the techies like to say: “garbage in, garbage out.”

Thus, the concept of prison may have survived from one mode of production to the next, but its barbarism lurks, as Serge indicates, not in in its content, but rather in its form: its abstract, instrumental rationality. This is a theme expressed in Serge’s
journalism from this period as well: “In machine civilization, man, leading a mechanized life, rationalized by technology, feels disaffected from nature, resentful against nature and his own nature” (quoted in Marshall 174). Therefore, the edifice becomes a metaphor for what Horkheimer and Adorno describe as the “pure immanence of positivism” wherein “Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of ‘outside’ is the real source of fear” (DE 11). As a document of modern utility, the prison stands perfectly suited to the machine of which it is a cog, another “document of barbarism.” Koestler concurs: “The rottenness of civilization reveals itself in curious symptoms; in fact, for example, that the stone walls of prisons no longer serve to protect society from the prisoner, but the prisoner from society” (DwD 93). One way to improve upon such “perfect” documents might not be to destroy them at all, but to reutilize them. Make them into museums, hospitals, schools.

Benjamin believes that we should stop “documenting” linearly and uncritically, as though we’re shifting “the beads of a rosary” (Illuminations 263). The problem is in the assumption that there’s a temporal sequence to history that needs to be adhered to. Serge paints a similar analogy in terms of the prison regime: “Slowly, one by one, the beads of that endless human chain are replaced, through the process of life and death” (MiP 134). This image is echoed again in the following chapter: “Two long parallel strands meet at the doors of the dormitory cell block, wind up the iron stairs, and line up, bead by bead, before the cell doors” (135). As though it were inevitable, sequential: bead-like beings, being marched towards death, one after the other, easily forgotten. Once we decide that lives are shiftable and cheap, like beads, all is lost. And “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”
In a chapter called “In a Cell” from *Men in Prison*, Serge ruminates on the consciousness of time, itself an appendage to the machine. The prisoner tries to reconcile the “terrible insubstantiality” of temporal existence with the deadness of prison life: “The problem of time is everything: nothing distinguishes one hour from the next: the minutes and hours fall slowly, tortuously. Once past, they vanish into nothingness. The present minute is infinite” (44). Serge will pick up this thread again in *Midnight in the Century*, this time in the context of the mass arrests and the homogeneity of such a sweeping period: “Weeks full of small events—the days went by very quickly although the hours were long and heavy—and completely empty….Men existed here in sharp relief, the accumulated hours crushed them, but time *per se* did not exist” (29). Serge reiterates this phenomenon later (and more literally) when a prisoner, forced to move from his longtime cell, finds himself newly destabilized: “He lost his calendar, the addition of weeks and months, and decided to live outside time” (40). First the prisoner loses his sense of time, and then time loses its sense of him: “Think of it: a year in prison awaiting trial, two in the Orel Central Prison, two at Tobolsk, twelve in deportation….Go back to find yourself alone, unknown, out of place, helpless” (ibid 59). One is in a perpetual state of stasis; one ages in a biological sense, the hands on the clock tick by, days are marked on the calendar, but “time *per se*” does not exist. It’s all the same, and devoid of meaning.

We encounter this theme often in the literature: the voidness, meaninglessness of time. In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn describes it thus: “The days rolled by in the camp—they were over before you could say ‘knife.’ But the years,

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55 This resonates somewhat with Solzhenitsyn’s complaint about the theft of actual days: “Again there wasn’t going to be a Sunday this week; again they were going to steal one of [our] Sundays” (*Ivan* 108).
they never rolled by; they never moved by a second” (52-3). Koestler’s describes something similar in *Dialogue with Death*: “Time crawled through this desert of uneventfulness as though lame in both feet…But there was something that was more astonishing, that positively bordered on the miraculous, and that was that this time, these interminable hours, days and weeks, passed more *swiftly* than a period of times has ever passed for me before” (119). Canadian theorist Ioan Davies argues for a “philosophy of prison” which “contemplates at once finitude and infinity, the concept of the carnal and the spiritual, of the violence of space, of the subterranean and the galactic, of the self and the many” (25). We may recall, from part one, Koestler’s “infinite sea [that] seemed to be contained in a grain of salt” and Serge’s “grains of sand…falling deeper with every instant into sordid obscurity.” I call these grand ruminations jailhouse epiphanies, somewhat alluded to by Davies when he describes “an imprisonment in the intersection between the finite and the infinite, a metaphysical cell where the human atom seeks to become part of the vast interstellar spaces” (23). Epiphanies—arrived at within the confines of a tiny cell serving as the manifestation of the metaphysical one—on the density of time-consciousness, vacillating between the finite and the infinite, the present melting into the past and leaving in its wake a “grain” within which the entirety of the universe is contained. Louis-Auguste Blanqui (socialist prison writer, cited frequently by Benjamin) saw clearly that “claims of the Enlightenment show themselves to be bourgeois *class* ideology in the nineteenth century, and universal history or Hegelian *Weltgeschichte* reduces to discrete nationalisms and nationalistic histories” (Bahti 8). For his oppositionist ideas he spent much of his life in jail, during which he developed his theory of eternal return (at least a decade before Nietzsche’s): “That which I am writing
at this moment, in a dungeon at the Fort du Taureau, I have written and shall write again forever, on a table, with a quill, under clothes and in entirely similar circumstances” (Eternity 150). This was predicated upon his interpretation of celestial bodies and stellar formations: “[The universe] is eternal, imperishable. Even though it is constantly transforming, it can neither diminish, nor increase, by one atom” (71). What this speaks to is a cosmic sort of stoppage or “petrified unrest” whereby the mere concept of progress is called into question. This is what Benjamin means when he says that the status quo “is the catastrophe.” Progress is the eternal return of barbarism. Serge, whose Men in Prison is essentially a treatise on the homogeneity of prison time, touches on this theme repeatedly:

I think of the mystery of time’s passage. There are minutes and hours which have no end: the eternity of the instant. There are many empty hours: the vacuity of time. There are endless days; and weeks which pass without leaving the least memory behind them, as if they had never been. I cannot distinguish the years that are behind me. Time passes within us. Our actions fill it….The empty hours and days which I yield to dead things have no more existence than shadows. (137, my emphasis)

Though these authors have different ways of expressing it—“infinite sea,” “eternal, imperishable,” “sordid obscurity”—the common denominator is the feeling that we’re all swept up in some cosmic maelstrom that we created but which has now overtaken us. The individual, if one ever existed, has been absorbed into the melee: “The individual, on whom society was supported, itself bore society’s taint; in the individual’s apparent freedom he was the product of society’s economic and social apparatus” (Adorno &
Horkheimer, *DE* 125). How to find our way out of this “infinite sea,” this “eternal imperishability,” this “sordid obscurity”? How does one undo his appendage-ship to a machine of his own design?

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For the writer-prisoner, a grain of salt is “pregnant” with an infinite sea; the universe is housed within a grain of sand. “There are so many prisons in the universe,” Serge muses, “every prison is a universe, every universe a prison” (*MiP* 144). We often encounter such epiphanies or what we might call gnomic truths in prison texts; this is why they’re always composed in the reflective mode.\(^5^6\) We need that contemplative dimension of recollection, so that we can experience the recreation in all its dynamism. We need the interpretive layer on top of the scenic description, because only then can we “glimpse” the dialectical image as described by Benjamin in its reinterpretation. For Benjamin, “Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions” (*Illuminations* 262). Now imagine “arrest” in its double meaning (cessation of happening and apprehension by authorities) and read Solzhenitsyn’s reflection on the experience: “That’s what arrest is: it’s a blinding flash and a blow which shifts the present instantly into the past” (*GA* 4). A “tiger’s leap into the past”—Solzhenitsyn’s line could be right out of Benjamin’s *Theses*. By some salient occurrence, a confluence, the past and the present coincide: “The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state [...] an image flashing up in the now of recognizability” (Benjamin, *AP* 471, 473).

Koestler, in his autobiography, *The Invisible Writing*, reports on a profound

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\(^{56}\) Certain scenes might be written in the present tense to slow things down, to provide a sense of immediacy, but this is never sustained for very long. A felt “authorial presence” is somewhat integral to the form.
“enchantment” that he experiences while etching mathematical formulas into the prison wall:

And then, for the first time, I suddenly understood the reason for this enchantment: the scribbled symbols on the wall represented one of the rare cases where a meaningful and comprehensive statement about the infinite is arrived at by precise and finite means. The infinite is a mystical mass shrouded in a haze; and yet it was possible to gain some knowledge of it without losing oneself in treacly ambiguities. The significance swept over me like a wave. (351)

Koestler, doing his best to “communicate what is incommunicable by nature,” invites us to indulge him in this mysticism before reminding us that he “was, of course, in prison and might be shot. But this was immediately answered,” he continues, “by a feeling whose verbal translation would be: ‘So what? Is that all? Have you got nothing more serious to worry about?’” (ibid). Even if it fails to convince that this actually occurred to him in the moment, we don’t doubt the experience at the writer’s desk, where the dimensions of being—or, more to the point, becoming—open themselves up to interpretation. Koestler then goes on to describe the epiphany of the empathic prisoner, how one feels when the “veil has fallen and one is in touch with ‘real reality’: “The ‘I’ ceases to exist because it has, by a kind of mental osmosis, established communication with, and been dissolved in, the universal pool….It could never be voluntarily induced” (352). An unplannable image, a dialectical stoppage. As Benjamin writes in an essay on Proust: “For an experienced event is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before and after it” (Illuminations 202). The event itself is one thing, existing in
the past, a relic of the author’s memory, but when he recreates the event in his work, it takes on that “aura of significance” that so intrigued Benjamin. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn describes a similar experience as it was relayed to him by a fellow inmate “whose brilliant career in astronomy was interrupted by his arrest”: “[He] saved himself only by thinking of the eternal and the infinite: of order of the Universe—and of its Supreme Spirit; of the stars; of their internal state; and what Time and the passing of Time really are” (144).57 Benjamin describes it thus: “[The] moment of awakening would be the identical with the ‘now of recognizability’ in which things put on their true—surrealist—face” (*AP* 464).

Historical totalities are housed in such epiphanies, insights into consciousness, potentialities for “grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly.” Authoritarian regimes rely heavily on homogenous, empty time to install their agendas, the “gaze of those who have won” in the words of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, “history as a closed continuity of ‘progression’ leading to those who rule today” (*SO* 155). Terry Eagleton agrees: “History is homogenous time of the ruling class; tradition belongs to the oppressed and exploited, who know, as ruling classes do not, that states of emergency are not the exception but the rule” (48). Thus, this Benjaminian “blasting” of an event from its context, this “flare-up” of freedom, however temporary, is anathema to the dominant narrative, an affront to the “ideological entrapment of the dominant class” (Jennings 52). In fact, the maintenance of homogenous, empty time is, according to Foucault, integral to disciplinary societies broadly speaking, what he describes as “evolutive historicity”:

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57 Incidentally, this is essentially Blanqui’s epiphany as described in *Eternity by the Stars*. 
The disciplinary methods reveal a linear time whose moments are integrated, one upon another, and which is oriented towards a terminal, stable point; in short, ‘evolutive’ time. But it must be recalled that, at the same moment, the administrative and economic techniques of control reveal a social time of a serial, orientated, cumulative type: the discovery of an evolution in terms of ‘progress.’ (160)

No apparatus has made better use of the administering of time than the disciplinary one. (Herein lay the seeds of social Darwinism, by the way, the notion that inferior beings could be “brought up to speed” by proper disciplinary implementation.) And like totalitarianism writ large, this “whole investment of duration by power” is inherently interminable. To have an actual end goal would be anathema to the system. The harnessing of homogenous, empty time, like power itself, is “exercised” indefinitely: “[H]aving become an element in the political technology of the body and of duration [it] does not culminate in a beyond, but tends toward a subjection that has never reached its limit” (ibid 162). Malignant normality whereby the means have become ends in themselves. If history is written by the winners, then it’s only fair that we should ask: What have they left out? The gaps are so easily filled because, for them, there’s a narrative that needs simplifying. Homogenous, empty time is both available and cheap: “the ease with which it can be penetrated is the very sign of its sterility” (Eagleton 45). Like shifting the beads of a rosary.

Homogenous, empty time, then, is what the historical record passes off as progress: dates, data, winners and losers, the spoils left to the victors. Lending credibility to the latter, it papers over the oppressed past: Serge’s “dead things” which “have no
more existence than shadows.” Or Solzhenitsyn, musing on the “resurrection of buried history” in the form of Civil War soldiers who entered the camps, eager to dispel propagandistic war myths: “The weighty tomes of the Civil War had long since been completed and the covers shut tight. The causes for which people fought in it had been decided. The chronology of its events had been set down in textbooks” (GA 109-110). Such “chronicles” often lack that “aura of significance” that manifests when we’re “confined to one sphere of experience.” These prison writers, in these moments, are finding the cracks, the interstices, and blasting them apart like rocks at a quarrying site, so as to redeem the truths that lie buried, the lives that have gone unaccounted for, forgotten: “Progress has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences” (AP 474). Like when Solzhenitsyn says with some irony, “[H]eave the corpses into the water, and pretty soon the surface is all smooth again and no one’s the wiser” (GA 132). Cynical, for sure, but look where we are now.

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Serge says quite plainly in his memoirs that “he who writes is essentially someone who speaks for all those who have no voice” (MR 53). Or whose voice has simply been silenced beneath the din of the victor’s narrative. The “true picture of the past flits by,” warns Benjamin, thus one must be attuned to the “moment of awakening,” described by Serge as a “loaded moment”: “Eternity was smiling down from the heavens the instant before. Now that moment is forever past. Die. It was a loaded moment” (MC 142). Memory fades, individual lives are ephemeral: “We forget everything,” says Solzhenitsyn, “What we remember is not what actually happened, not history, but merely the hackneyed dotted line they have chosen to drive into our memories by incessant
hammering” (GA 120). These writers are correcting the record, erasing the “dotted line” and reinscribing the lives that were lost to history: “And thus it is that I am writing this book solely from a sense of obligation—because too many stories and recollections have accumulated in my hands and I cannot allow them to perish” (ibid 228). Following Benjamin, Žižek argues that history is conceived “as a text, a series of events which ‘will have been’—their meaning, their historical dimension, is decided afterwards, through their inscription in the symbolic network” (SO 151). But that symbolic network, we know, is anything but stable. We need these brave writers to work against the dominant narrative, to take that “tiger’s leap into the past,” to breach that “arena where the ruling class gives the commands” (Illuminations 261).

Totalitarian regimes threaten to hijack history, to “domesticate and disarm the more radical aspects of their actions” (Jennings 52). It’s no wonder that so many of these authors here, both critical and creative, had to flee for their very lives, not to mention the lifework of their texts. Benjamin, we know, was overwhelmingly concerned about the latter. The following fragment appears in the Afterward of Susan Buck Morss’ The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project: “I noticed that Benjamin was carrying a large black briefcase […] It looked heavy and I offered to help carry it.” “This is my new manuscript,” he explained. “But why did you take it for this walk?” “You must understand that this briefcase is the most important thing to me,” he said. “I cannot risk losing it. It is the manuscript that must be saved. It is more important than I am” (332).58

58 There is some debate as to the contents of the briefcase. Some believe it contained a more polished draft of The Arcades Project (we hope not), but more likely it was the Theses, which survived thanks to Arendt, who got it safely to Adorno, who published the mimeograph for the first time in 1942. For more
It was Marx who said that “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” The problem to be avoided is a “History” in which one time, one event, one life, simply replaces the one that came before it (like the “bureaucratic scribbler” replacing names with numbers); but if a specific history becomes an “image” (a grain of sand or salt, a mathematical formula etched on the wall), it can be understood, apprehended, outside of continuous time and against the sanitized “archive,” which caters to the victor. “Contemplation brings about a reevaluation of your values,” Serge argues, “an auditing of your accounts with yourself, and with the universe. Introspection opens up the endless vistas of the inner life, shines a penetrating light into the most secret recesses of our inner being” (MiP 48). It is precisely this “penetrating light” that the machine hopes to snuff out, more so than the lives that get dispatched to homogenous, empty time. These writers are actively resisting any apprenticeship to the machine. “I will overcome this,” Serge writes near the end of Men in Prison. Serge has less optimism, however, for the automaton who arrives at his cell door to (finally) announce his release: “He is like a part of the wall: He is nothing but a cog in the machine. I learned long ago that some men are indistinguishable from things” (201). But then, we can only imagine the rote-ness, the sterility with which the guard delivered the news. Perhaps even the jealously. As Serge had already indicated, “We suffer for years; he suffers by the day.”

Serge reports that sickness and disease are rampant in Santé prison (as one might imagine they would be in any poorly-funded prison in the mid-twentieth century), and here even the “sawbones” become appendages to the machine: “Each visit lasts from

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on this, see Buck Morris’ Dialectics of Seeing, Andy Merrifield’s “Benjamin in the City of Lights” and Marshall Berman’s “Paris Under Glass.”
forty to sixty seconds, the time necessary to fill out the prescriptions (typically “bromide”) column in rapid scrawl” (MiP 56). Occasionally “inspectors” visit the prison, a mere formality, for no prisoner ever lodges a complaint: “Nobody wants to get on the wrong side of the omnipotent authorities” (59). “Guards and officials blend into the walls themselves, the Judases, bars and bolts. You feel in the marrow of your bones that they are no more than cogs in the prison machine” (75). The “almoners” at least have an air of benevolence, “words and gestures” that would appear to brand them as being beyond the system. But the façade inevitably cracks: “The whole ambiguous duplicity of the chaplain’s calling was apparent to me here, as was the whole revolting sham of his function” (75). Blessings are rote, and the redemptive prescriptions are about as helpful as that of the physician: “Read the Book of Job. He, too, thought that he was abandoned even by God…” (77).

But the prison clergy’s real “function,” which Serge only alludes to, is made explicit by Koestler: “Then at twelve of one we heard the shrill sound of the night bell. It was the priest and the firing squad. They always arrived together” (DwD 170). In fact, Serge devotes and entire chapter, “Capital Punishment” to these ritualized, sanitized killings, linking them structurally to the economic system and thematically to Benjamin’s cry for a redeemed past:

The class that wants to build a new world, forever cleansed of killing machines, must learn how to kill in battle so as not to be killed. But it must learn as well—along with all those who turn resolutely toward the future—to abolish a past which has put such arms into its hands, to abolish the refined, useless, senseless, gratuitous cruelty of death inflicted by an “act of justice.” (MiP 83, my emphasis)
Essentially, Serge is ventriloquizing Benjamin’s theory of history, that “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]” (Illuminations 261). To “abolish the past” means to redeem it in “the now”—not the present per se, but a conception of time that collapses the past and present into one, a constellation, a monad, a dialectical image. Some glimmer, some “spark of hope” is congealed in this image: some object from the past (a sculpture, a fragment, a book, a battle) that could not have betrayed its secret until it collides with the messianic moment in which the revolutionary finds him or herself in the act of “kill[ing] in battle so as not to be killed.” The “senseless, gratuitous cruelty of death” that occurred in the past—that spark, is reignited. “The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action” (ibid). The concept is not chronological, but dialectical: only by abolishing a hitherto unredeemed past can we halt the present catastrophe, opening up the possibility for an unoppressed future.

For Benjamin, then, historical materialism rejects one-dimensional perspectives towards history and instead approaches history redemptively; it uncovers the hidden barbarisms of the past, the lost voices of the dead. Instead of isolated representations put forth by traditional historicism, historical materialism is able to “go beyond” the façade of so-called “cultural treasure.” The seemingly superfluous details that are lost to history,
while they may not represent any epoch in its totality, do represent, in their imagistic clarity and starkness, the individual in a particular, crucial moment. We should bear in mind that the goal of the prison has always been to shroud its machinations in mystery—to avoid, as prison historian Michael Meranze puts it, the “dangers of sympathetic identification” (132). The lengths that the machine will go to in service of hiding an oppression-in-progress has been known to reach almost comical proportions. Solzhenitsyn reports on a situation which had the warders of the camp scrambling; prisoners had devised a way of “kiting” out leaflets to inform the public of the atrocious conditions: “If the leaflets fell close to the camp, the warders ran to collect them; if they fell further away, the motorcyclists and horsemen dashed after them. Whatever happened, they tried to prevent free citizens from reading an independent version of the truth” (GA 412). The machine aims to kill the messenger. The “anti-appendages” aim to fan “the spark of hope in the past,” to “brush history against the grain” (Illuminations 255, 257). To expose the dominant narrative for what it is: a tool of the ruling classes.

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As far as prison literature goes, there’s probably no better example of a character who embodies the machinic appendage better than Koestler’s Gletkin from Darkness at Noon, to whom we shall now return. Gletkin, we’ll recall, is the antagonist for Rubashov, Koestler’s hapless, disgraced Bolshevik, scapegoated for the sake of the Party. When we meet the “stony and expressionless” Gletkin, he’s just taken over as Ivanov’s replacement once word got out that the latter had “conducted the examination of [Rubashov’s] case negligently” (which is to say that he betrayed human qualities) and hence had to be “liquidated.” Gletkin is young, among the new guard, a true believer raised on Party
doctrine: “no traditions, no memories to bind it to the old, vanquished world. It was a
generation without an umbilical cord” (148). Cut off from history, Gletkin is
synecdochical; he stands in for all the automatons born into Stalinism and utilitarianism,
determined never to waver from Party doctrine, never to show emotion. Serge describes
the stereotype quite aptly in *Midnight in the Century*:

> It is necessary to describe the word *being*, when speaking of him. It would be
totally incompatible to speak of his soul, or even of his mind, although the
cerebral mechanism of a higher vertebrate endowed with speech, with thought up
to a certain point, even with ‘historic consciousness’ (to use his own expression),
functioned quite efficiently inside his cranium. (103)

A robot, basically—*being*, not becoming.

Gletkin’s interrogation of Rubashov, spanning much of the latter half of the book,
might best be described as perfunctorily cold: “[he] never showed signs of fatigue, never
yawned, never smoked, seemed neither to eat nor drink, and always sat behind his desk in
the same correct position” (172). To get a confession out of Rubashov is all that matters.
Supposedly Rubashov had “negotiated with representatives of a foreign power,” but both
parties knew this to be false—or at the very least, irrelevant. Something is in jeopardy,
historically speaking, of being erased: whether or not that thing is worth salvaging isn’t
the point; the philosophical debate is whether or not history itself is worth preserving:
“Rubashov repeated to himself for the hundredth time that Gletkin and the new
Neanderthalers were merely completing the work of the generation with the numbered
heads. That the same doctrine became so inhuman in their mouths, had, as it were, merely
climactic reasons” (185). What Gletkin and the other “new Neanderthalers” were
attempting to erase wasn’t just dissenters in the ranks, anachronistic old Bolsheviks who still harbored nostalgia for Lenin’s utopia, but the very idea that such people ever existed: they were out to kill any links to anything that was.

Steadfast and ruthless as Rubashov and Ivanov had been in their younger days, even they retained a sense of historical necessity, the sense that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (Illuminations 254). Rubashov and the old-guarders regarded themselves as true Marxists, historical materialists who “retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger” (ibid 255). This was just such a moment: Rubashov and his colleagues were being “singled out”—in danger of being deleted from the historical record, leaving behind nothing but automatons “without umbilical cord, without frivolity, without melancholy” (DaN 185). This is the key difference between traditional (or “vulgar”) historical materialism and Benjamin’s conception of it: the former harbored a certain “distain for tradition.” Benjamin scholar Richard Wolin explains:

The Marxist distain for tradition is also evident in the unreflective employment of the method of ideology critique, in which cultural expressions are deemed illusory and valueless in and of themselves, mere epiphenomenal reflections of the economic structure. Benjamin realized, however, that the lore of tradition stakes claims that the present can choose to ignore, but from which it will never be able to escape—for there is already too much of the past in us, and thus to deny the past is to deny part of ourselves. (265, my emphasis)
Thus Koestler, an ex-Marxist unlike Benjamin, shared with the latter a conception of history whereby tradition should, for better or worse, be salvaged. Not that we shouldn’t evolve, but that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”

When we deny the past, we deny our becomingness. The irony, of course, is how starkly this mentality mirrors the effects of commodity fetishism and erasure of the individual under capitalism, the very mechanism that Gletkin and his ilk were determined to eradicate: “Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures. Their criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function and the schemata assigned to it” (Horkheimer & Adorno, DE 21-2). Both sides are “caught in the web they had spun themselves “(DaN 205). Funny that this ideological horseshoe, whereby the extreme ends of the political spectrum seem almost to touch, is so often invisible to the extremists themselves. Extreme ideologies, whether socialist or fascist, are purely doctrinal, and as Camus points out, such doctrines “cannot be directed toward good, but only toward efficacy”: “The State is identified with the ‘apparatus’; that is to say, with the sum total of mechanisms of conquest and repression” (Rebel 181). Koestler, we know, served time under both regimes. There’s an image, in fact, at the end of Darkness at Noon, one that conjures a curious ambiguity. Rubashov is about to die. He fixes his gaze on a portrait on the wall, a familiar figure, but for some reason Rubashov can’t make it out: “Was it [Stalin] or was it the other—he with the ironic smile or he with the glassy gaze?” The figure then morphs, mystically, into the assailant: “A shapeless figure bent over him, he

61 I realize that in claiming to know what Koestler “believes” that I risk treading on the intentional fallacy. His nonfiction texts, The Invisible Writing and Dialogue with Death, make his views fairly clear; but even in the context of the novel, the author’s sympathies are never in doubt: “If history were a matter of calculation, how much did the sum of two thousand nightmares weigh, the pressure of a two-thousandfold helpless craving?” (146).
smelt the fresh leather of the revolver belt; but what insignia did the figure wear on the sleeves and shoulder- straps of its uniform—and in whose name did it raise the dark pistol barrel?” (216). Hitler’s, Stalin’s—what’s the difference? The “shapeless figure” is just that: a vapid ideologue, homogenous and empty, an “it.” A machinic appendage.

What Rubashov and his ilk had learned too late was that historical materialism is, in the teleological sense, a flawed philosophy, for the simple fact that there is no end. The goalposts will continually move, the game will enter into endless overtime. The ultimate irony is that after putting up with a series of soul-crushing interrogations, Rubashov ends up confessing to numerous false allegations. This has been the subject of some confusion among readers and scholars alike: why on earth would Rubashov, whose death was all but imminent and stood to gain nothing, sign off on his “guilt”? Linking the fictional Rubashov to historical figures who themselves had mysteriously confessed to false crimes, Koestler explains in The Invisible Writing that the guilt in question, while misplaced, is still very real: “[T]he method by which a Mrachkovsky, a Bukharin or Rubashov was induced to confess, could only be applied to a certain type of Bolshevik with an absolute loyalty to the Party” (401). They saw their confessions as their duty, their ultimate sacrifice for the cause. As “appendages,” they’d become cancerous, their flesh grown gangrenous, and thus they were willing to be amputated for the sake of the body. Any oppositionist limbs, no matter how superficial, had to be severed. Solzhenitsyn explains: “[I]n the interest of discrediting for the future any idea of opposition, we are required to accept as having taken place what could only theoretically have taken place. After all, it could have, couldn’t it?” (GA 127-8, his emphasis). This speaks to the insidiousness of this ideology: eliminate not only the “wrongdoers,” but the very idea of
wrongdoing itself. “The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same ‘law’ as the logical exposition of its ‘idea.’ Ideologies pretend to know the whole historical process—the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future” (Arendt, OT 469). It’s not that ideology itself is inherently insidious; but when its adherents are so committed that they refuse to entertain a narrative antithetical to it, to the point of a complete break with reality, then they become “useful idiots,” appendages to the machine. Solzhenitsyn, reflecting on his gulag years in the *Archipelago*, recalls his jailhouse conversion—the “first stirrings” of true empathy:

> It was granted me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: *how* a human being becomes evil and *how* good….In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. (312)

Do we believe him? Did this epiphany really occur to him there on that “rotting straw”—or are these merely the musings of an author genuflecting, imposing his “contemplative dimension of recollection” onto the original experience, seizing the opportunity to espouse a gnomic truth? Does it matter?

> “The daily routine of life,” Koestler muses in his memoir, “even of life in a condemned cell, cannot sustain for long the melodrama of despair; it banishes the agony to the dungeons of consciousness” (*DwD* 115). This is how we survive trauma: by *sidebarring* the pain, subsisting in a state of what psychologists call a “dissociative

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62 Of course, we needn’t look too far for a contemporary analogue. The election deniers in the United States, Q-anon supporters—the internet has become a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and fringe ideologies.
fugue.” To some degree, one cannot be begrudged his appendage-ship to the machine, walling off the pain, particularly if one is living “life in a condemned cell.” But it can’t stay buried forever. All we need is some spark, a catalyst, a “memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.” Solzhenitsyn, in his novel, narrates the prisoner’s general sense of malaise while foreshadowing his own eventual cure: “There was little sense in writing. Writing now was like dropping stones in some deep, bottomless pool. They drop; they sink—but there is no answer” (Ivan 33). One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich is just that—one day of material existence whereby survival is all that matters. Surely Solzhenitsyn felt differently while typing those words, years after the ordeal, determined now to be the one “who speaks for all those who have no voice.” Solzhenitsyn’s novel is all about his induced sense of acedia, whereby appendage-ship was less about acquiescence and more a means of survival: “During his years in prison camps he’d lost the habit of planning for the next day, for a year ahead, for supporting his family. The authorities did his thinking for him about everything—it was somehow easier that way” (Ivan 35). Later, in the Archipelago, he describes a similar state of helplessness while being interrogated: “The major showed me once again where to sign. I signed. I could simply not think of anything else to do” (114). The stilted robotics of the language replicates the situation: What else is to be done? Malignant normality, we recall, makes it seem as though this is all routine, conforming to the omnipotence of fate, which renders human activity valueless in itself: total submission to the existing order. But, as Terry Eagleton argues, “If we were able to recollect our ancestors, then in a moment of shock we might be able to trigger the unpalatable memory trace at a ripe time, blast through the continuum of history and create the empty space in which the forces of tradition might
congregate to shatter the present” (78). For these authors, that moment is “now-time.” At
the writer’s desk, doing the work.

Homogenous, empty time is what the machine relies on for fuel, to maintain the
status quo, to keep the prisoner accustomed to the slow drag of the clock and in a
constant state of acedia. But just as every evil always contains the seeds of its own
demise, every oppressive situation contains the potential for freedom, the glimmer of
redemption. Solzhenitsyn describes the way in which the Stalinists had become so brazen
as to claim that time itself answers to soviet power:

“If it’s reached its peak,” said the captain reflectively, it’s one o’clock, not noon.”
“What do you mean,” Shukov demurred, “Every old-timer knows that the sun
stands highest at dinner time.”
“Old-timers, maybe,” snapped the captain. “But since their day a new decree has
been passed, and now the sun stands highest at one.” (Ivan 53)

Whether the irony is lost on the characters or not is irrelevant; the point is, since the
reliance of time offers some spark of hope, it has to be suppressed. “No zek ever saw a
clock or a watch,” Solzhenitsyn writes, “What use were them to him anyway? All he
needs to know is: will reveille sound soon? How long till roll call? How long to dinner?
To the last clanging of the rail?” (ibid 131). Koestler, in his memoir, manages to subvert
this sense of acedia, to turn it on its head. In one of his jailhouse epiphanies, he holds a
mirror up to the almighty clock and realizes that although he may be behind bars, he’s not
a prisoner to homogenous, empty time:
I racked my brain in an effort to explain to myself these paradoxes of time….Gradually it dawned on me that those days which, owing to their uneventfulness and dreariness, seem longest, shrink to nothing as soon as they have become the past, precisely because they have no extension, no volume, no specific gravity; they become geometric points, a diminishing vacuum, nothing. The greater the sum of blank days, the lighter their weight in memory. The time that, when it is the present, pauses most slowly, passes swiftest of all in the memory. (DwD 119)

Prison “time” may drag, but it’s also liberating in the sense that the prisoner can choose to be unoppressed by it; he can harness it monadically, dialectically—if given the opportunity, he might even “disarm” the clock, literally: “In the July revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris” (Illuminations 262).

Why, one may reasonably ask, would meagerly-resourced revolutionaries want to waste precious ammunition on such a symbolic act? If we had the space, we’d be tempted to unpack the numerous references to the timepiece as depicted by Marx in Capital Volume I.63 Suffice it to say that this handy device—the “automatic clock”—may have been more beneficial to the exploiters of labor than any other single invention. Lives are ruled by it, existences revolve around it, mouths fed or not—all based purely upon the

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63 And numerous they are. He cites this tyrannical contraption in pure Marxian fashion, for instance, in chapter 14 as one of only a few “great inventions” to have come out of the “handicraft” period: “The handicraft period bequeathed to us the great inventions of the compass, gunpowder, type-printing, and the automatic clock” (468).
accounting of time “spent” (or “served”) engaging in one activity or another. The
conscious activity of a revolutionary shooting at a clock is roughly analogous to a
prisoner filling his empty time—when it “pauses most slowly”—by reclaiming it later on:
redeeming it in the form of writing. This is perhaps why we have prison memoirs: so that
the writer can redeem the time that otherwise would have felt unclaimed, to make good
on the “debt”—not to some abstraction we call “society,” but to humanity. These authors
are making an arrest of their own: the attempt to apprehend homogenous, empty time
with a “flash” of the messianic:

For while the relation of present to past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the
relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image,
suddenly emergent.—Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not
archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. [] Awakening []
(AP 462)

Which is why we needn’t bother quibbling over the temporal “status” of the imagistic
jailhouse epiphany—did it really occur in the scene-as-rendered or in the act of writing?
While I would argue that the poetic truth of the image always trumps the historical
accuracy of the report, I would argue more broadly that the premise lacks nuance; for the
“then” of happening can only come to its complete understanding, its full fruition, when
combined with the “now of recognizability.” Thus, the epiphany may have been there at
the time—in nascent, fragmentary form—but when combined with the “flash” of the
now, it all coalesces: “Each fragment plays more than an evidentiary role: it carries
within it a piece of that larger puzzle which, when reconstituted, will reveal the hidden
and veiled story” (Jennings 163). The writer isn’t manufacturing anything; he or she is
merely lifting the veil, reintegrating the fragments, retaining “that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger.” A cessation of happening, a shock. A naked lunch. An awakening.

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With all the Enlightenment emphasis on empiricism and data, one would think that a measurable quantity such as time would be, for the authoritarian, sacrosanct. But no. Ideology trumps the data; time is just another manipulable tool; empathic emotions simply don’t fit the framework. Pontificating on the indifference of the Stalinists to their prisoners’ humanity, Solzhenitsyn asks, “How can you expect a man who’s warm understand a man who’s cold?” (*Ivan* 19). It might be a reasonable question if this were a zero-sum game, but one’s warmth needn’t necessitate another’s coldness. There’s plenty of warmth to go around, if only we could stop concerning ourselves with some notion of “eternal progressivism,” and start appreciating—to some doable degree—the present moment, the now.

Koestler relates, in *Dialogue with Death*, a particularly melancholy realization about human psychology, and how it can be reconstituted as a force for empathy: “The consciousness of being confined acts like a slow poison, transforming the entire character….Now it is beginning to gradually dawn on me what the slave mentality really is. I could wish that everyone who talks of mass psychology should experience a year in prison” (136). He’s speaking here of the acedia as described by Benjamin, this “indolence of the heart” which “despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly” (*Illuminations* 256). Descriptions of such a state occur throughout the
literature, indolent hearts with empty expressions to match. Solzhenitsyn describes one such character: “All life had drained out of his face but it had been left, not sickly or feeble, but hard and dark like carved stone” (Ivan 119). Serge depicts many such souls himself: his empathic descriptions show how even the most feared and reviled of men, the murderers, maintain their basic humanity:

I scrutinized his face, by chance a little more ravaged than the ordinary face, with a somewhat higher forehead, its tense muscles and deep lines betraying more concentrated power. The bearded face of an old tycoon with irons in every fire, the kind you meet in banks and in factories, surrounded by the din of work […] Our glances crossed, doubtless without his seeing me. His brown eyes were bewildered and absent, rather gentle: the sickly air of a man suffering migraine headaches. (MiP 74)

The din of the factory, the rapaciousness of the banker, the man’s ravaged face, his migraine headaches—all of it woven into a tapestry of misery compounded by history. Finding some kind of inner peace in prison, or even after, can be notoriously difficult, for it tends to break one’s spirit, one’s sense of self-worth. But it doesn’t have to be this way. We get the sense that the writing, for instance, is particularly therapeutic, a working-through and a making-sense of a traumatic set of circumstances. We can see how the writing experience gets grafted onto the one being written about, comes to represent a retrospective state of grace. Solzhenitsyn had created the character of Alyosha in One Day to embody this sentiment: “You should rejoice that you’re in prison,” he tells Shukov, the cynic. “Here you have time to think about your soul” (136). Later, in the Archipelago, Solzhenitsyn himself echoes this sentiment: “I turn back to the years of my
imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: ‘Bless you, prison!’” (313). Koestler strikes a similar note in his own memoir: “Often when I wake at night I am homesick for my cell in the death-house at Seville and, strangely enough, I feel that I have never been so free as I was then” (DwD 195). And we have this from Serge’s memoirs: “I am sorry for those who grow up in this world without ever experiencing the cruel side of it, without knowing utter frustration and the necessity of fighting, however blindly, for mankind” (43-44).

To paraphrase Gramsci, we might maintain a certain pessimism of the intellect balanced by an optimism of the will. We may never conquer our “shadow” in the Jungian sense, our “presentation of self” in Erving Goffman’s sense, our “performativity” in the Butlerian sense—but we can make peace with them. To make peace with your compulsion to perform, to play a role, and to finally just live, unencumbered. This is, as Koestler says, “the most complete experience of freedom that can be granted a man” (DwD 196).
In the waiting room. – As a third-semester MFA student, I had to complete a teaching practicum. I devised “Writing Your Life” with the intention of pitching it to libraries, alternative schools, bookstores, coffee shops. I’d been procrastinating on this; all I wanted to do was work on my manuscript. But if I didn’t secure a venue and fulfill the requirement on time, then I was facing an additional semester, more debt. I lucked out with Lisa, the director of the Greenfield Library in western Massachusetts. Not only did she book me on the spot, she offered to make flyers and plug the practicum on the library’s website. She even mentioned local radio and newspaper ads. All I had to do was write the blurb. “Believe me,” she said, “people will be marking their calendars for this.” But I was skeptical. I needed a minimum of three students for a total of fifteen hours, and to me that seemed a lot to expect. Three people were going to spend fifteen hours with me because I had knowledge? Fulfilling the requirement was one thing, but I couldn’t bear the thought of being disappointing. It was the most anxious I’d been since inmate reception.

Austere and bookish-looking in her horn-rimmed glasses and cargo pants, Lisa embodied the quintessential Pioneer Valley native. “Let’s see about scheduling,” she said, swiveling in her chair. She kicked off a Birkenstock and bit her lip, stared intensively at the monitor in front of her. “I just have to make sure that none of the dates coincide with any Jewish holidays.”

My blurb implied that I could help writers find their voices. When I thought about this later, I realized I couldn’t even articulate what that meant, so I ran a Google search for “writer’s voice” and found a Wikipedia page. It was only about four inches long, but
the reference section cited *Finding Your Writer’s Voice* by Thaisa Frank and Dorothy Wall. I ordered it immediately.

I couldn’t count on having students, let alone material for workshop, so I decided to put a packet together. *Finding Your Writer’s Voice* turned out to be useful, so I lifted some excerpts. I did the same with *The Situation and the Story* by Vivian Gornick and *The Kiss* by Katherine Harrison. With Joan Didion’s essay “In Bed” in its entirety, I figured the packet was thick enough. But I added “In the Waiting Room” by Elizabeth Bishop just in case. My goal for the first session was simply to get through it, lecturing the whole time if necessary.

I asked my girlfriend, Janette, if she wouldn’t mind attending the class. That way, I explained, I could count on at least one person showing up. Between the practicum, the manuscript and everything else, she knew that this was my toughest semester. And she’d been an angel, even running to the art supply store at the last minute to get me a jumbo pad of paper and an easel. We worked nights together at the restaurant, her out front and me in the kitchen. I’d always been awed by the spinning of pizza dough, how cool and effortless it looks, and by the time Janette was hired, I had mastered it. Luckily, she’d arrived right after I was promoted. Had I still been scrubbing sauté pans all night, I wouldn’t have had the confidence to ask her out.

Two years earlier, while in the lockup, I’d slept a lot. I read spy novels, lifted makeshift weights, ordered snacks from the commissary. Janette, meanwhile, was unhappily married to a deadbeat philanderer. She now worked two jobs to support her three kids. To have concealed my past, or to have construed my current situation as somehow unfortunate, would’ve been petty and utterly pointless. Janette seemed every
bit as interested in me as I was in her. I had a scene I was working on for the manuscript: an awkward first date set in a restaurant. I was trying to find where the beats were, so I asked Janette if she’d read the woman’s lines. She agreed, and when we got to the end, I could see that she was sad. I asked what was wrong. “Nothing,” she said. “It’s just that I wish it was me, that’s all. I want to be the girl you write about.”

I was to have the basement meeting room from six until eight, when the library closed. Janette and I stopped at a Dunkin Donuts, grabbed two dozen, and arrived by 5:30. Lisa had folded up the tables and arranged some chairs. As I paced the floor, wondering if anyone would show, I realized both the full extent of my anxiety and source of it: I cared. I knew I wouldn’t bomb, but I truly wanted to do well. I remembered my options back in LA. Having declined to “cooperate,” my street credibility was intact; I could’ve easily gone back into dealing. That had only been a few years before. Now I was a grad student. I had a manuscript in progress and a job. And here I am, pacing the floor of the Greenfield Public Library, awaiting my students.

By 5:45, I had my three. I introduced myself to the early arrivals and thanked them for coming. Bob is bald, Barbara has a cane. Linking the name with a physical characteristic made remembering easier, I’d read, and I was eager to show them the courtesy. By 6:05 there were twenty-two people: middle-aged women, mostly, with a smattering of seniors. Lisa was thrilled; she arranged for additional seating before running off to make more copies of the packet. Janette helped me with the props.

The basement meeting room was equipped with a pull-down screen and projector, so I had arranged for the library’s DVD player to be on hand. Janette dimmed the lights and I cued the clip. We see Jerry Seinfeld take the stage in a wide shot. There’s tepid
applause, a Gothic Comedy Club sign in the background. Then there’s a cut to close up, and we see that he’s mid-joke, and stumbling, his timing clearly off. Smiling nervously, he struggles to get back into rhythm but then he blanks altogether, eventually defaulting to crib sheets on the stool behind him. But it’s no use. The moment is ruined, he can’t get it back, and we see that he’s mortified. “Is this your first gig?” a woman heckles.

This scene, I explained, is from Comedian, a documentary released in 2002—four years after the final episode of Seinfeld’s hit show. It depicts, in detail, his return to standup comedy. How challenging it is to develop five minutes of material. How, even after having reached the pinnacle of success, there’s no magic. The laughs still have to be earned. The blank page, filled.

I talked about raw voice—the way in which we speak, think, and feel naturally—and how it contains the seeds of good material, good prose, but that it’s unrefined; it must be shaped into a narrative. I went over how a piece of writing needs both a situation and a story: the circumstances that provide us with context, and the wisdom that the writer has come to impart. I spent over an hour lecturing to a mostly silent room. I was beginning to worry that I’d burn through the whole packet too early. I got to the final section, Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room”—a poem featuring a six-year-old narrator, waiting while her aunt gets her dental work done. I liked Bishop’s use of snowballing data: a steady accumulation of images that, when taken together, cue us to much larger themes. There’s a National Geographic in the girl’s lap and a war raging overseas. And here, amidst the “grown-up people, arctics and overcoats, lamps and magazines,” this young girl comes to consciousness and realizes her becoming-feminine in an oppressive world. I especially liked the lines, “you are an I, / you are an Elizabeth / you are one of
them,” because they reminded me of my own (rather slow) series of realizations. Hoping to ride out the session, I launched into a near line-by-line analysis. When I got to the part about the women in the *National Geographic*, how they’re “wound round and round with wire,” I paused. “What is Bishop trying to say here?” I asked.

Faces looked up at me quizzically. Finally, a hand went up in the back row. It was Barbara with the cane. “I think she’s talking about how women are marked by society,” she said.

“Good,” I said. I pointed to Bishop’s use of imagery—“like the necks of light bulbs”—and how that seemed to support Barbara’s insight. Then Janette raised her hand. “I think there’s more to it than that,” she said. “First, we see that the babies with pointed heads are bound by string. But then the women are bound by wire.”

“Interesting point,” I said. “So, you’re talking about the girl’s sense of becoming and the forces that shape her identity.” I then added some general analysis about the scene and the subtext—how the action grounds us in reality while the girl, herself, dissolves into the abstract. I was trying to sound smart.

“No,” Janette said, “it’s simpler than that. “The babies in the magazine are objectified, but to a lesser degree. They’re bound only with string. But the women are bound by wire. Their burden is greater. They’re marked, like Barbara said, but it’s more than just physical. They’re still not seen as equals. Get it, they’re still waiting.” Her eyes narrowed a bit. “Don’t you know anything about women?” Everyone laughed.

I felt good enough to skip my night run. Besides, I didn’t want to keep Janette waiting. We ordered takeout from our favorite spot, The Sierra Grille, and headed back to
her place to relieve the sitter. We put her kids to bed and then we opened a bottle of wine.

“You did a good job, babe,” she said.

“You really think so? I kept feeling like I was losing them.”

“No, no, they really liked you. I mean, they practically had to kick us out!”

It was true. People had hung around to ask questions, and the staff had to remind us that they were closing. So I knew it went well, but that was part of Janette’s charm. She was always there with a compliment, whether I’d fished for one or not.

We were halfway through *You Can Count on Me*, a film directed by Kenneth Lonergan, when I saw that Janette had fallen asleep. This had always irritated me: when a girlfriend couldn’t make it through a movie I liked, but I didn’t feel that way now. Janette had her day job in the morning. I quietly laced up my shoes. It was too late for new work, I figured, but I could still go home and tweak some sentences, maybe sharpen a dull metaphor. I leaned over, kissed Janette’s forehead, and reached for my keys on the coffee table. That’s when I felt a tightening on my wrist. Without moving noticeably, Janette had grabbed me. I looked at her. Still holding me, she snapped the fingers of her other hand and, in one smooth motion, pointed down. Then she went limp again. It was the last bit of energy she had, and she’d spent it on me.

She moaned a little when I lifted her. “I know, babe,” I said. “I love you too.” Without opening her eyes, she smiled and said *Hmm*. I put her in bed and unlaced my shoes.
Epilogue. – I walked away from drugs. I know how simplistic that sounds, but to dramatize their departure from my life would be disingenuous. I’m clean, as they say, but not sober. I’ll crack a beer when the sun goes down, but the drugs were part of a lifestyle; they were associative. First, I associated them with fun and fitting in. Then I associated them with status and money. Finally, I associated them with delusion and soullessness, so by the time the cops arrived, my hedonistic leanings were on the wane. I realize that the absence of struggle might sound unfeasible to some, and I’ve seen the other side. I had a customer at one point, a young lady who, while waiting for me to fill her order, would scan my coffee table for residue. She was like a sniper; the specks never knew what hit them. She’d lick my digital scale if I left it out. And I remember the look on a girlfriend’s face when, confronted with my lack of empathy, she complained that I didn’t understand, and she was right. I’d been on drugs for most of my adult life, but I’d never felt powerless over them. What I’ve realized is that the power of certain drugs, cocaine in particular, is the subtleness, the slow and insidious rewiring of your brain. Cocaine eats away at your capacity for empathy (which is why, by the way, it’s so common on Wall Street), and more than that, you see no reason why others would empathize either. It reduces everything to a transaction.

I was deluded for years, surely, but after my arrest the last thing I was thinking about was getting high. It wouldn’t have been made sense, and as easily as I lapse into whimsy, my pragmatism has a way of winning. And then there’s the vanity factor. I’m still vain, but these days it’s less about looking cool and more about not looking silly. As of this writing I’m nearly fifty years old. To dress up now and seek out a party scene, to locate a dealer, to keep chasing what I know I won’t find—that’d be a bit pathetic. I’ve
made other associations. The key difference is that something created is infinitely more satisfying than something consumed. It’s a subtler high, but much longer lasting.

I never asked or expected anyone to visit me in jail. But someone did. Carrie. Despite all the drama, the initial breakup and the soulless years that followed, this woman still cared for me. Not only did she decide to help with that ridiculous “suppression” charge, but now she was enduring the dystopia that is MCJ. You can’t thank someone enough for this. The line is long, the paperwork tedious, the pat-down undignified—the better part of her own day spent drearily so that mine could be made a little brighter. She took a seat across from me in that cubby-like structure and picked up the receiver and smiled at me, doe-eyed, through the partition. I could have cried, but you don’t do that in jail. She told me that I looked good, which was a lie. I hadn’t shaved or cut my hair in a long time and I was swimming in my county blues. She asked if I needed anything, and I said yes—books. Soon after I received Sway by Zachary Lazar (which I liked) and Choke by Chuck Palahniuk (which I didn’t). Before leaving, she leaned into the partition. I leaned in as well, and as we kissed that disgusting glass, I realized that I’d have given anything to actually feel her lips. In this sense, jail is the fairest of places. Everything you ever took for granted is stripped away from you, and then you’re left with two choices. You can harden to the hurt. Blot it out. Feel less. Or you can go to those places deep down inside where you’re forced to confront the ugliest parts of who you are. And then do the work.


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