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Sacrifice

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The impossibility of realization: power as sum of seductions

Where constraint breaks people, and mediation makes fools of them, the seduction of power is what makes them love their oppression. Because of it people give up their real riches:
a for a cause that mutilates them

for self-denial always amounts to an attempt to make inhumanity attractive. Here is an anecdote of Brecht's that makes the point perfectly. To illustrate the proper way of doing a service for friends, and to entertain his listeners, Herr K tells a story. Three young people once came to an old Arab and said: "Our father is dead. He left us seventeen camels, but he laid down in his will that the eldest son should have a half, the second son a third, and the youngest a ninth part of his possessions. Try as we will, we cannot agree on how to divide up the camels. So we'd like to leave it up to you to decide". The old man thought it over before replying: "I see that you need another camel before you can share them out properly. Take mine. It's the only one I have but it's at your disposal. Take it, divide the beasts up, and bring me back whatever you have left over". The young men thanked him for his friendly offer, took his camel and divided up the eighteen animals as follows: the eldest took a half, which was nine camels, the second son took a third, which was six, and the youngest took his ninth, which was two. To everyone's surprise there was still one camel remaining, and this they promptly returned with renewed thanks to their old friend. According to Herr K, this was the perfect example of the correct way to do a friend a service because nobody had to make a sacrifice. Here is a model which should be made axiomatic and strictly applied to all of everyday life.

It is not a question of opting for the art of sacrifice as opposed to the sacrifice of art, but rather of putting an end to sacrifice as art. The triumph of an authentic *savoir-vivre* and of the construction of authentically lived situations exists everywhere as a potentiality, but everywhere these tendencies are distorted by the falsification of what is human.

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Perhaps the sacrifice of the *present* will turn out to be the last stage of a rite that has maimed humanity since its beginnings. Our every moment crumbles into bits and pieces of past and future. We never really give ourselves over completely to what we are doing, except perhaps in orgasm. Our present is grounded in what we are going to do later and in what we have just done, with the result that it always bears the stamp of unpleasure. In collective as well as in individual history, the cult of the past and the cult of the future are equally reactionary. Everything which has to be built has to be built in the present. According to a popular belief, the drowning man relives his whole life in the instant of his death. For my part I am convinced that we have intense flashes of lucidity which distill and remake our entire lives. Future and past are docile pawns of history which merely cover up the sacrifice of the present. I want to exchange nothing—not for a thing, not for the past, not for the future. I want to live intensely, for myself, grasping every pleasure firm in the knowledge that what is radically good for me will be good for everyone. And above all I would promote this one watchword: "Act as though there were no tomorrow".

There is such a thing as a reformism of sacrifice that is really a sacrifice to reformism. Humanistic self-mortification and fascistic self-destruction both leave us nothing — not even the option of death. All *causes* are equally inhuman. But the will to live raises its voice against this epidemic of masochism, wherever there is the slightest pretext for revolt; for what appear to be merely partial demands actually conceal the process whereby a revolution is being prepared: the nameless revolution, the revolution of everyday life (1). The refusal of sacrifice is the refusal to be bartered: human beings are not exchangeable. Henceforward the appeal to voluntary self-sacrifice is going to have to rely on three strategies only: on art, on 'great human values', and on the present (2).

1

Where people are not broken—and broken in—by force and fraud, they are seduced. What are Power's methods of seduction? Internalized constraints which ensure a good conscience based on a lie: the masochism of the *honnête homme*. Thus Power castrates but calls castration self-denial; it offers a choice of servitudes but calls this choice liberty. The feeling of having done one's duty is Power's reward for self-immolation with honour.

As I showed in 'Banalités de base' (*Internationde situationniste*, issues 7-8; English version: *The Totality for Kids*), the master-slave dialectic implies that the mythic sacrifice of the master embodies within itself the real sacrifice of the slave: the master makes a spiritual sacrifice of his real power to the general interest, while the slave makes a material sacrifice of his real life to a power which he shares in appearance only. The framework of *generalized appearances* or, if you will, the essential lie required for the development of privative appropriation (ie, the appropriation of things by means of the appropriation of beings) is an intrinsic aspect of the dialectic of sacrifice, and the root of the infamous separation that this involves. The mistake of the philosophers was that they built an ontology and the notion of an unchanging human nature on the basis of a mere social accident, a purely contingent necessity. History has been seeking to eliminate privative appropriation ever since the conditions which called for it ceased to exist.

But the metaphysical maintenance of the philosophers' error continues to work to the advantage of the masters, of the 'eternal' ruling minority.

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The decline and fall of sacrifice parallels the decline and fall of myth. Bourgeois thought exposes the materiality of myth, deconsecrating and fragmenting it. It does not abolish it, however, because if it did the bourgeoisie would cease to exploit—and hence to exist. The fragmentary spectacle is simply one phase in the decomposition of myth, a process today being accelerated by the dictates of consumption. Similarly, the old sacrifice-gift ordained by cosmic forces has shrivelled into a sacrifice-exchange minutely metered in terms of social security and social-democratic justice. And sacrifice attracts fewer and fewer devotees, just as fewer and fewer people are seduced by the miserable show put on by ideologies. The fact is that today's tiny masturbations are a feeble replacement indeed for the orgasmic heights offered by eternal salvation. Hoping for promotion is a far cry from hoping—albeit insanely—for life everlasting. Our only gods are heroes of the fatherland, heroes of the shop floor, heroes of the frigidaire, heroes of fragmented thought...How are the mighty fallen!

Nevertheless. The knowledge that an ill's end is in sight is cold comfort when you still have to suffer it in the immediate. And the praises of sacrifice are still sung on every side. The air is filled with the sermonizing of red priests and ecumenical bureaucrats. Vodka mixed with holy water. Instead of a knife between our teeth we have the drool of Jesus Christ on our lips. Sacrifice yourselves joyfully, brothers and sisters! For the Cause, for the Established Order, for the Party, for Unity, for Meat and Potatoes!

The old socialists used to like saying, "They say we are dying for our country, but really we are dying for Capital". Nowadays their bureaucratic heirs are berated in similar terms: "You think you're fighting for the proletariat, but really you die for your leaders." "We are not building for the future; men and steel are the same thing in the eyes of the five-year-plan." And yet, what do young leftist radicals do after stating these obvious truths? They enter the service of a Cause—the 'best' of all Causes. The time they have for creative activity they squander handing out leaflets, putting up posters, demonstrating or heckling local politicians. They become militants, fetishizing action because others are doing their thinking for them. Sacrifice seems to have an endless series of tricks up its sleeve.

The best cause is one in which the individual can lose himself body and soul. The principle of death is simply the denial of the principle of the will to live. One or other of these principles must win out, however. There is no middle ground, no possibility of compromise between them on the level of consciousness. And you have to fight for one or for the other. Fanatics of established orders—Chouans, Nazis, Carlists—display their unequivocal choice of the party of death with absolute consistency. The

provoke spontaneous participation on the part of the spectators. The only thing the spectators participate in, though, is an aesthetic of nothingness. The only thing that can be expressed in the mode of the spectacle is the emptiness of everyday life. And indeed, what better commodity than an aesthetic of emptiness? The accelerating decomposition of values has itself become the only available form of entertainment. The trick is that the spectators of the cultural and ideological vacuum are here enlisted as its organizers. The spectacle's inanity is made up for by forcing its spectators—passive agents par excellence—to participate in it. The ultimate logic of the happening and its derivatives is to supply the society of masterless slaves, which the cyberneticians have planned for us, with the spectatorless spectacle it will require. For artists in the strict sense of the word, the road to complete assimilation is well posted: they have merely to follow the progressive sociologists and their ilk into the super-corporation of specialists. They may rest assured that Power will reward them well for applying their talents to the job of dressing up the old conditioning to passivity in bright new colours.

From the perspective of Power, everyday life is a latticework of renunciations and mediocrity. A true void. An aesthetic of daily life would make us all into artists responsible for organizing this nothingness. The final ploy of official art will be the attempt to lend therapeutic features to what Freud, in a dubious simplification, referred to as the death instinct—ie, rapturous submission to authority.

Wherever the will to live fails to spring spontaneously from individual poetry, there falls the shadow of the crucified Toad of Nazareth. The artist in every human being can never be brought out by regression to artistic forms defined by the spirit of sacrifice. We have to go back to square one.

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The surrealists—or some of them at any rate—understood that the only valid transcendence of art lay in direct experience, in works that no ideology could assimilate into its internally consistent lie. They came to grief, of course, precisely because of their complaisant attitude towards the cultural spectacle. Admittedly, the current process of decomposition of thought and art has made the danger of aesthetic assimilation much less than it was in the thirties. The present state of affairs tends to favour situationist agitation.

Much mournful wailing has gone on—since surrealism's demise, in fact—over the disappearance of idyllic relationships such as friendship, love and hospitality. But make no mistake: all this nostalgia for the more human virtues of the past answers to one thing and one thing only, namely, the impending need to revive the idea of sacrifice, which has been coming under too heavy fire. The fact is that there will never be any friendship, or love, or hospitality, or solidarity, so long as self-abnegation exists. The call

individual cannot give himself up for a revolution, only for a fetish. Revolutionary moments are carnivals in which the individual life celebrates its unification with a regenerated society. The call for sacrifice in such a context is a funeral knell. Jules Vallés fell short of his own train of thought when he wrote: "If the submissive do not outlive the rebellious, one might as well rebel in the name of an idea". For a militant can only be a revolutionary *in spite of* the ideas which he agrees to serve. The real Vallés, the Communard Vallés, is first the child, then the student, making up in one long Sunday for all the endless weeks that have gone before. Ideology is the rebel's tombstone, its purpose being to prevent his coming back to life.

When the rebel begins to believe that he is fighting for a higher good, the authoritarian principle gets a fillip. Humanity has never been short of justifications for giving up what is human. In fact some people possess a veritable reflex of submission, an irrational terror of freedom; this masochism is everywhere visible in everyday life. With what agonizing facility we can give up a wish, a passion, stemming from the most essential part of ourselves. With what passivity, what inertia, we can accept living or acting for some *thing*—'thing' being the operative word, a word whose dead weight always seems to carry the day. It is hard to be oneself, so we give up as quickly as possible, seizing whatever pretext offers itself: love of children, of reading, of artichokes, etc, etc. Such is the abstract generality of the ill that our desire for a cure tends to evaporate.

And yet, the reflex of freedom also knows how to exploit a pretext. Thus a strike for higher wages or a rowdy demonstration can awaken the carnival spirit. As I write thousands of workers around the world are downing tools or picking up guns, ostensibly in obedience to directives or principles, but actually, at the profoundest level, in response to their passionate desire to change their lives. The real demand of all insurrectionary movements is the transformation of the world and the reinvention of life. This is not a demand formulated by theorists: rather, it is the basis of poetic creation. Revolution is made everyday despite, and in opposition to, the specialists of revolution. This revolution is nameless, like everything springing from lived experience. Its explosive coherence is being forged constantly in the everyday clandestinity of acts and dreams.

No other problem is as important to me as a difficulty I encounter throughout the long daylight hours: how can I invent a passion, fulfill a wish or construct a dream in the daytime in the way my mind does spontaneously as I sleep? What haunts me are my unfinished actions, not the future of the human race or the state of the world in the year 2000. I could not care less about hypothetical possibilities, and the meandering abstractions of the futurologists leave me cold. If I write, it is not, as they say, 'for others'. I have no wish to exorcize other people's ghosts. I string words together as a way of getting out of the well of isolation, because I need others to pull me out. I write out of impatience, and with impatience. I want to live without dead time. What other people say interests me only in

as much as it concerns me directly. They must use me to save themselves just as I use them to save myself. We have a common project. But it is out of the question that the project of the whole man should entail a reduction in individuality. There are no degrees in castration. The apolitical violence of the young, and its contempt for the interchangeable goods displayed in the supermarkets of culture, art and ideology, are a concrete confirmation of the fact that the individual's self-realization depends on the application of the principle of 'every man for himself', though this has to be understood in collective terms—and above all in *radical* terms.

At that stage in a piece of writing where people used to look for explanations, I would like them from now on to find a settling of scores.

2

The refusal of sacrifice is the refusal to be bartered. There is nothing in the world of things, exchangeable for money or not, which can be treated as equivalent to a human being. The individual is irreducible. He is subject to change but not to exchange. Now, the most superficial examination of movements for social reform shows that they have never demanded anything more than a cleaning-up of exchange and sacrifice, making it a point of honour to humanize inhumanity and make it attractive. And every time slaves try to make their slavery more bearable they are striking a blow for their masters.

The 'road to socialism' consists in this: as people become more and more tightly shackled by the sordid relations of reification, the tendency of the humanitarians to mutilate people in an *egalitarian* fashion grows ever more insistent. And with the deepening crisis of the virtues of self-abnegation and of devotion generating a tendency towards radical refusal, the sociologists, those watchdogs of modern society, have been called in to peddle a subtler form of sacrifice: art.

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The great religions succeeded in turning people's wretched earthly existence into a time of voluptuous expectation: at the end of this valley of tears lay life eternal in God. According to the bourgeois conception, art is better equipped than God to bestow eternal glory on people. The art-in-life-and-in-God of unitary social systems (Egyptian statuary, African art, etc) gave way to an art which complemented life and sought to make up for the absence of God (fourth-century Greece, Horace, Ronsard, Malherbe, the Romantics, etc). The builders of cathedrals cared as little for posterity as did de Sade. Their salvation was guaranteed by God, as de Sade's was guaranteed by himself: neither sought a place in the museum of history. They worked for a supreme state of being, not for the temporal survival of their work or for the admiration of centuries to come.

History is the earthly paradise of the bourgeois idea of transcendence. This realm is accessible not through commodities but through apparent gratuity: through the sacrifice called for by the work of art, through activity seemingly undetermined by the immediate need to increase capital. The philanthropist does good works; the patriot produces heroism; the soldier fashions victory; the poet or scholar creates works of literary or scientific value, and so on. But there is an ambiguity in the very idea of 'making a work of art', for it embraces both the lived experience of the artist and the sacrifice of this experience to the abstraction of a creative substance, ie, to the aesthetic form. The artist relinquishes the lived intensity of the creative moment in exchange for the durability of what he creates, so that his name may live on in the funereal glory of the museum. And his desire to produce a durable work is the very thing that prevents him from living imperishable instants of real life.

Actually, if we except academicism, artists never succumb completely to aesthetic assimilation. Though he may abdicate his immediate experience for the sake of appearances, any artist—and anyone who tries to live is an artist—must also follow his desire to increase his share of dreams in the objective world of others. In this sense he entrusts the thing he creates with the mission of completing his personal self-realization within the collectivity. And in this sense creativity is revolutionary in its essence.

The spectacle, in ideology, art and culture, turns the wolves of spontaneity into the sheepdogs of knowledge and beauty. Literary anthologies are replete with insurrectionary writings, the museums with calls to arms. But history does such a good job of pickling them in perpetuity that we can neither see nor hear them. In this area, however, consumer society performs a salutary task of dissolution. For today art can only construct plastic cathedrals. The dictatorship of consumption ensures that every aesthetic collapses before it can produce any masterpieces. Premature burial is an axiom of consumerism, imperfection a precondition of planned obsolescence. Sensational aesthetic departures occur only because someone briefly finds a way to outdo the spectacle of artistic decomposition in its own terms. And any such originality soon turns up mass-marketed in every five-and-dime. Bernard Buffet, pop art, Andy Warhol, rock music—where are you now? To talk of a modern work of art enduring is sillier than talking of the eternal values of Standard Oil.

As for the progressive sociologists, once they had finished shaking their heads sadly over the discovery that the value of the art object had become nothing but its market price, and that the artists were working according to the norms of profitability, they decided that we should return to the source of art, to everyday life—not in order to change it, of course, for such is not their function, but rather to make it the raw material for a new aesthetic which would defy packaging techniques and so remain independent of buying and selling. As though there were no such thing as consuming on the spot! The result? Sociodramas and happenings which supposedly

fascist slogan *Viva la muerte!* must at least be given credit for pulling no punches. By contrast, our reformists of death in small doses and socialists of *ennui* cannot even claim the dubious honour of having an aesthetic of total destruction. All they can do is mitigate the passion for life, stunting it to the point where it turns against itself and changes into a passion for destruction and self-destruction. They oppose concentration camps, but only in the name of moderation—in the name of moderate power and moderate death.

Great despisers of life that they are, the partisans of absolute self-sacrifice to State, Cause or Fuhrer do have one thing in common with those whose passion for life challenges the ethos and techniques of renunciation. Though antagonistic, their respective perceptions of revelry are equally sharp. Life being so Dionysian in its essence, it is as though the partisans of death, their lives twisted by their monstrous asceticism, manage to distill all the joy that has been lost to them into the precise moment of their death. Spartan legions, mercenaries, fanatics, suicide squads—all experience an instant of bliss as they die. But this is a *fete macabre*, frozen, aestheticized, caught for eternity in a camera flash. The paratroopers that Bigeard speaks of leave this world through the portal of aesthetics: they are petrified figures, madrepores—conscious, perhaps, of their ultimate hysteria. For aesthetics is carnival paralyzed, as cut off from life as a Jibaro head, the carnival of death. The aesthetic element, the element of *pose*, corresponds to the element of death secreted by everyday life. Every apocalypse is beautiful, but this beauty is a dead one. Remember the song of the Swiss Guard that Celine taught us to love.

The end of the Commune was no apocalypse. The difference between the Nazis dreaming of bringing the world down with them and the Communards setting Paris on fire is the difference between total death brutally affirmed and total life brutally denied. The Nazis merely operated the mechanism of logical annihilation already designed by humanists preaching submission and abnegation. The Communards knew that a life constructed with passion cannot be taken away; that there is more pleasure in destroying such a life than in seeing it mutilated; and that it is better to go up in flames with a glad heart than to give an inch, when giving an inch is the same as giving up all along the line. "Better die on our feet than live on our knees!" Despite its repulsive source—the lips of the Stalinist Ibarruri—it seems to me that this cry eloquently expresses the legitimacy of a particular form of suicide, a good way of taking leave. And what was valid for the Communards holds good for individuals today.

Let us have no more suicides from weariness, which come like a final sacrifice crowning all those that have gone before. Better one last laugh, *à la Cravan*, or one last song, *à la Ravachol*.

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The moment revolution calls for self-sacrifice it ceases to exist. The