

Blaze of Glory

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Applause in the executive boardroom. Hands pound backs, mouths twist into smiles. A round man with a stain of indecipherable grease on his shirt collar rises to speak, gesturing inanely at an electronic display. His hands twitch with glee as he highlights data points and maps out forecasts.

'Returns for this quarter are exceptional, a threefold uptick on last year. Our customer base has expanded markedly. Any number of substantial brand deals. And a few bookings of particular extravagance brought in half a million single handedly. Simply put, they're dropping like flies.'

Uproarious cheer breaks out once more. They had indeed sown a good harvest. Fulfilling their customers' most neurotic requests gave the assembled board members and lesser functionaries a perverse satisfaction. In a sense, they did genuinely care. But this care was delightfully finite. After the moment of successfully facilitated self-termination, it could freely evaporate. The business model at Blaze of Glory™ ensured that client relationships never lasted too long.

It had all begun with Dignitas. Geographical localization of euthanasia laws created an inevitable concentration of demand. Desperate and despairing men and women flocked to Switzerland and Belgium in the hope of outpacing the future. But something strange happened. The allure of death began to take a hold beyond those 'expected customers'—the terminally ill, irrecoverably deformed, or incurably paedophilic—and exert an almost inexorable pull on the rest of society. Its rapturous theatricality, devil-may-care vibe, and (above all) resplendent finality proved appealing to those wishing to retroactively cement their social status or claim Warhol's promised fifteen minutes of fame. Minor mutilations did the rounds on social media—for a time, the 'Stigmata Challenge' dominated TikTok—but for the real deal, the whole hog, dedicated corporations sprung up, boutique experiences which promised an extinction like no other.

Centuries of media satirising bourgeois decadence promptly exited the sphere of fiction. It was a matter of months before four Chinese businessmen found themselves sat in a French villa around a fine wooden table, loaded with all manner of delicacies: quail eggs, dripping churros, a trough of bœuf bourguignon, a monumental Yorkshire pudding drenched in the thickest gravy, consuming and

devouring and fucking their brains out with three supine street urchins and a buxom schoolmistress until they slowly wound up dead, gorged with fat and cream atop the table lengthways, faithful to the good old *Grande Bouffe* down to the smallest detail.

Newspaper obituary columns burst their banks and were replaced by dedicated magazines. Martyrdoms were orchestrated with such conviction that sanctification seemed almost guaranteed; terror attacks dropped accordingly. Advertising slogans commanding people to 'Die doing what you love!' (or the even less savoury 'Go out with a bang') brought hordes of lascivious old men to the doors, swallowing handfuls of Viagra as they waited for their chance to expire as close to the moment of orgasm as possible. Countless weddings were called off after stag nights got out of hand. Television channels offered a round-the-clock programme of self-murder, a source of envy and inspiration in equal measure. This was more than an industry. Suicide had become an art, an ecstatic unity of swansong and encore. It was the chance to be, in death, all which one had not been in life.

Enough.

That is, I think, enough atrocity for the moment, sufficient verbal bombast.

Carry on like that much longer and my thought experiment won't have any legs to stand on. Since that's all it is, a thought experiment, a little game to play with myself and string out in words. Think of the untapped riches that remain, from psychologizations of the workforce to population crises, government interventions to ideological counterblasts, here in particular the scope is almost endless, with pleas for a return of suicide to its former authenticity, teenage nihilists unable to cope with the realization of their nocturnal insincerities, class strugglers pressing for the industry's nationalization and lamenting its domination by the rich, even in death the poor can't get themselves heard, on and on it goes!

Yet at the same time it goes nowhere, nowhere at all. What do I know of suicide? What, indeed, do I know of the world beyond its reconstitution as a mass of tensions and forces, concepts given tortuous names and flagellated in writing? What will this achieve? What, in short, is my right?

Seek to reduce your guilt by attempting to include others within it. Turn to critique. And generalise. Raise the conceptual stakes as high as possible.

The influence of a writer like Don DeLillo or David Foster Wallace seeps out of the above sketch like mustard from an over-filled sandwich. The same over-stylized form and sprightly ironic tone, the same central motif of a contradiction or minor perversity magnified and drooled over *ad absurdum*. Spellbound by form, that glossy coat and empty shell. The prose is infected by the same sickness as its protagonists. In this respect, at least, it tells us something we already know, without hinting at the possibility of change. It appears as a monument to the inescapability of our condition. In face of such impotence, we have no choice but to laugh. We revel in it. *Infinite Jest* is the brick-sized proof of this; Foster Wallace observed that he set out to write a sad book and ended up with a funny one.¹ After that, he set out to write a boring one and pathetically succeeded. And then, at the age of 46, he killed himself. (DeLillo lives on, thrashing out works of increasing mediocrity.)

Blame modernity: perhaps it isn't possible to write a sad book any longer. Here, there is no tragedy, only farce. Theodor Adorno took a dim view of representational art. For him, it inevitably involved the possibility of sadistic identification on the part of the 'audience'; even the 'sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment'.² Years later, conservatives argued that kids playing violent video games would learn to associate happiness with violence, and we all laughed at them. But the issue runs deeper than this merely representative function; the status of art itself appears dangerously entangled with its offering of enjoyment. I exit a cinema showing of *Schindler's List* thinking 'what great art I have just been privy to', caught in a terminal spiral of self-satisfaction and fawning praise for Stephen Spielberg. W. H. Auden admitted that no single line of his managed to 'save a single Jew', since 'poetry makes nothing happen'.³ Art imposes itself over the reality it seeks to depict. This is the ambivalence of aestheticization, the trapdoor lurking in the movement from reality to art to audience, in the fundamental artificiality of everything which secures art's necessary difference from the world.

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that 'poets are shameless with their experiences: they exploit them'.⁴ The lyric poet who confines himself to the nooks and crannies of his own swollen consciousness is a minor offender. Autofiction is arrogant and indulgent, but it knows its place. That Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* series, the most notorious project of this kind, resulted in nothing more than an angry uncle and some mundane Norwegian family drama makes clear that the exploitation at work here is trivial. Far more shameless is the appropriation of the suffering of others—thousands, millions, impersonal and uncredited—as grist for the aesthetic mill. Look above: suicide isn't the point. What the piece wants to articulate is a certain feeling for the grotesque nature of modernity. But suicide is traduced, forced to play along in this garish masquerade.

'The Sunday edition of the *Kärntner Volkszeitung* carried the following item under "Local News": "In the village of A. (G. township), a housewife, aged 51, committed suicide on Friday night by taking an overdose of sleeping pills".⁵ So begins Peter Handke's novella *Wunschloses Unglück* (*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*); it is his mother who has taken this overdose. Here is no dissimulation; the quoted banality of a regional newspaper report drives home the act's horrific reality. This is not to say that *Wunschloses Unglück* is anti-literary. Handke notes that 'as usual when I am engaged in literary work, I am alienated from myself and transformed into an object, a remembering and formulating machine'—writing as self-reification, mechanisation of the mind.⁶ The artist has the privilege of separation from the world, they can write or paint themselves out of a situation and look upon it anew as something transfigured. In the case of Handke, egoistic abstraction is, however, necessarily bound by a filial adherence to the facts of his mother's life and death.

All the same, an unavoidable step is taken by the translation of experience into language, wrestling bodies and minds in motion into the inky strictures of text. For this, form is required—the true engine of prose, that which generates its meaning. Indulgence and alienation loom in this choice also. Selfishness is the inevitable outcome. Claire-Louise Bennett protests that 'experimental' prose is not experimental *for her*, but honest, the product of a background which does not correspond to the literary mainstream.⁷ She makes much of being, along with Ann Quin, a working-class female writer who deploys decidedly unusual prose forms in her attempts to make sense of the world. Quin killed herself, in 1973, at the age of 37. Bennett recounts, in *Checkout 19*, finding a corpse hanging from a tree on a visit to Yorkshire.⁸ This may or may not be relevant.

Formally, writing appears the opposite of suicide. It is the affirmation of life—even if only one's own. But is not suicide also an act of self-authoring? Why else would we leave suicide notes?

The critic often strikes me as a kind of cuckold, jerking off in the corner of the literary dancefloor. But 'creative' writing itself bears an essentially masturbatory character. Events, people, and feelings are co-opted in the interests of stimulating the self, fantasised about at length, and carefully fiddled with before being splurged onto the page. Autofiction, merely the most explicit variety of this, becomes autoeroticism. The same is true of reading and reception: the way in which I'm able to take such joy from a perceptive line of thought or sublime turn of phrase, without it having the slightest impact on my social or political behaviour; the impotence of the beauty I detect within argumentative and aesthetic forms alike, their incisive and interlocking geometries, motivating no single scrap of action aside from buying and reading yet more books to bask on my shelves and dehydrate in the desert sun.

The miracle involved in this is that such an apparently selfish activity can not only sublimate the writer's dysfunctional emotions but also resonate for others. Bernard Mandeville thought that private vices generated public virtues.⁹ The more a decadent aristocracy gambled and luxuriated, the more money circulated, allowing all and sundry

1 Cf. Stephen Burn (ed), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (University Press of Mississippi 2012) 55.

2 Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment' (1974) I/87-88 *New Left Review* 85. Originally published in German as 'Engagement' in 1962.

3 Auden quoted in Beth Ellen Roberts, 'W. H. Auden and the Jews' (2005) 28(3) *Journal of Modern Literature* 87.

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (first published 1886, Reclam 1988) §161. Translation the author's.

5 Peter Handke, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* (first published 1972, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1974) 3.

6 *ibid* 5.

7 Cf. Moore Institute, 'Experimental Fiction: Rob Doyle and Claire-Louise Bennett' (*Youtube*, 25 November 2021) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJaHD6mHKdc>> accessed 22 June 2022.

8 Claire-Louise Bennett, *Checkout 19* (Penguin 2021).

9 Cf. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (first published 1714, Penguin 1989).

to reap the rewards. Self-consciously virtuous action could hope for no such inadvertent benefit. The Dutchman's model is more applicable to aesthetics than economics. Through some perverse transubstantiation in the mind or on the page, the selfish scribbles of those deluded enough to call themselves writers generate a universal benefit. A scrap of daily suffering leavens and nourishes. They slice their own wrists so all can drink.

P.S. A retrospective confession: 'Keep trying, try everything. And if all else fails, say that it is an essay' (Kurt Tucholsky).¹⁰

¹⁰ Ignaz Wrobel [Kurt Tucholsky], 'Die Essayisten' *Die Weltbühne* (28 April 1931) <<https://www.textlog.de/tucholsky-essayisten.html>> accessed 22 June 2022. Translation the author's.