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Transgression, An Elegy

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Sade does not give us the work of a free man. He makes us participate in his efforts of liberation. But it is precisely for this reason that he holds our attention.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, "MUST WE BURN SADE?"

Vito Acconci, later to be known as the art world's "godfather of transgression," is crouched under a low wooden ramp constructed over the floor of the otherwise empty Sonnabend Gallery in New York. Apparently he's masturbating to sexual fantasies about the visitors walking above him, the soundtrack of which is projected through loudspeakers installed in the

Liberties

corners of the gallery. "You're on my left . . . you're moving away but I'm pushing my body against you, into the corner . . . you're bending your head down, over me . . . you're pushing your cunt down on my mouth... you're pressing your tits down on my cock... you're ramming your cock down into my ass..." Now and then gallery goers can hear him come. The piece is titled *Seedbed*.

It was 1971, Nixon was in the White House, and artists were shooting, abrading, exposing, and abjecting themselves, deploying their bodies to violate whatever proprieties had survived the 1960s, and shatter the boundaries between art and life. This would, in turn, rattle and eventually remake sclerotic social structures and dismantle ruling class hegemony, or so I learned later that decade from my Modern Art History instructor, a charismatic Marxist-Freudian bodybuilder who fulminated about Eros and Thanatos and seems never to have published a word, but greatly influenced my thinking on these matters.

Transgression had been so long implanted into the curriculum that it had become a tradition — a required introductory course at the art school I attended as an undergraduate. Transgression was the source of all cultural vitality, or so it seemed. We learned that aesthetic assault was the founding gesture of the avant-garde, which had been insulting the bourgeoisie for over a century, dating back in the visual arts to 1863 and the Salon des Refusés in Paris. The classic on exhibit was Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, previously rejected by the jury of the annual sponsored Salon de Paris. Manet was his day's godfather of transgression, though the real scandal of the painting wasn't that a nude woman was casually picnicking with two clothed men and gazing directly at the viewer. No, according to my instructor, it was that Manet let his

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brushstrokes show, an aesthetic offense so great that visitors had to be physically restrained from destroying the painting. It seemed like an enviable time to have been an artist.

In this lineage, we took our places. I felt it was my natural home, a mental organizing principle. It augured freedom, self-sovereignty — I was angry at the world's timid rule-followers and counted myself among the anti-prissy, though my personal disgust threshold has always been pretty low. Acconci I found both disgusting and intriguing. The heroic transgressor mythology, I eventually came to see, definitely had its little vanities, its preferred occlusions. Even the origin story was dodgy; in fact the Salon des Refusés was itself officially sponsored, something I don't recall my instructor mentioning. Hearing of complaints by the painters who were rejected by the Salon de Paris, Emperor Napoleon III had given his blessing to a counter-exhibition, cannily containing the backlash by accommodating the transgressors. Possibly there's always a certain complicity between the transgressive and the covertly permitted — shrewd transgressors, like court jesters, knew which lines *not* to cross.

A few years before *Seedbed*, Acconci had performed his equally notorious *Following Piece*, which involved randomly selecting and then stalking a different unwitting person through the streets of New York City until they entered a locale — an office, a car — where they could not be trailed. He did this every day for a month. The duration of the artwork was effectively controlled by the individual being pursued though their participation was not, which gave the piece its edge of creepiness. The documentation now resides in The Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection — count Acconci among the shrewd transgressors.

Of course, terms like “consent” were heard infrequently in

arty-leftish circles in those days and the idea that it could be unambiguously established had yet to be invented. Eros itself seemed less containable, which was among the things people mostly liked about it in the years after the sexual revolution and before HIV. Even sexual creepiness seemed less malign: sex was polymorphous and leaky, aggression was inseparable from sex and its attendant idiocies, this was largely understood as the human condition, also a big wellspring of artistic inspiration. Anyway, *Seedbed*'s audience would have presumably been wise to the content of the piece before entering Sonnabend and being enlisted for roles in Acconci's onanistic scenarios, though from today's vantage “implied” consent is no sort of consent at all. About *Seedbed*, Acconci was prone to explanations such as “my goal of producing seed led to my interaction with visitors and their interaction, like it or not, with me.” The extended middle finger of that “like it or not” (and the unapologetic prickishness of “producing seed”) now seems — to borrow my students' current terminology — a little “rapey.” But from the new vantage, the entire history of the avant-garde can seem a little rapey.



What was the turning point? When did transgression go south? Even by 2013 damage control was required. When *Following Piece* was displayed at a MOMA exhibition that year, a nervously disingenuous caption was posted to mitigate potential umbrage: “Though this stalking was aggressive, by allowing a stranger to determine his route the artist gave up a certain degree of agency.” As if getting to determine the route neutralized the piece's aggression, like carbon offsets for polluters are meant to do for the environment? The artist gave up nothing

that I can see, but that was the basic job description for artists from the Romantic era on: give up *nothing*.

The wrestling match between the caption and the photos now seems emblematic. If “like it or not” was the master trope of the Manet-to-Acconci years, today’s would have to be *encroachment*. Transgression has been replaced by trauma as the cultural concept of the hour: making rules rather than breaking them has become the signature aesthetic move, that’s just how it is, there’s no going back. New historical actors have taken up places on the social stage and made their bids for cultural hegemony, having sent the old ones to re-education camp. These days it’s the *transgressed-upon* who are the protagonists of the moment: the *offended*, people who are *very upset* by things, their interventions a drumbeat on social media, their tremulous voices ascendant. (Online cultural commissar is now a promising career path.) And the mainstream cultural institutions are, on the whole, deferring, offering solace and apologies, posting warning signs and caveats to what might cause aesthetic injury. Aesthetic injuries flourish nonetheless.

Sure, there have always been offended people, but those people used to be conservatives. Who cared if they were offended, that was the point. What has changed is the social composition of the offended groups. At some point offendability moved its offices to the hip side of town. The offended people say they’re progressives! Which requires some rethinking for those of us shaped by the politics of the previous ethos.

After a century and a half of cultural immunity, transgression has started smelling a little rancid, like a bloated roué in last decade’s tight leather pants. But okay, change happens, the world is in flux, life is a river, nothing stays the same. Let’s try not to get defensive about it. Okay yes, I’m talking to myself,

it’s me who feels defensive. But what’s the point of clinging to superseded radicalisms in a different world and time? Please be patient as I attempt to wrestle myself out of a long-term romance with a dethroned idea. I’m doing my best. I’m a bit conflicted.

It was never precisely said that I recall, but it seems evident in retrospect that there was a particular idea of the self that was embedded in the aesthetics of transgression: a self *too* buffered against the blows of the world, *too* stolid. It was an artistic duty to shatter this securely integrated self. The role of the authoritarian personality in the rise of European fascism, as analyzed by Wilhelm Reich and his Frankfurt School counterparts, was still in the air at the time of my inculcation into the cult of transgression, its tentacles still wrapped around the counter-culture and the antiwar movement. Character rigidity was the signature feature of the political right, we learned, who were despicable moral cops with sticks up their asses. In the version of twentieth-century art history that I was taught, art audiences and upright citizens generally were all deeply in need of psychological jolts and emetics. These benighted people needed to have their complacencies rattled; as an artist, you were meant to take up that task, defy the censors, search out and assault social norms and conventions, especially the ones embedded deepest within our (or their) sensibilities.

Art had already abandoned objecthood by then; now the mission was plumbing your depths and darkest instincts, then assaulting the audience with the ickiest stuff. Art was supposed to be perilous and messy. Psychoanalysis had long ago told us that the modern personality structure was a hardened carapace formed around traumatic memories or fantasies that had become bottled up and fetid, and had to be manumitted. Sure this was aggressive, but sublimating

aggression into art was what made art feel alive, a collective therapeutics, maybe not unlike love: potentially transcendent. It was a world peopled by depressives and jerks who doubled as therapists, putting culture on the couch and then joining it there; we diagnosed its pathologies and our own, we invented curatives. Sometimes those were painful: success was measured in outrage generated.

People understandably howled when their carapaces were under assault, but that wasn't *bad*. Violation was an ethical project. Censorship was a tool of the death drive and the authoritarians, but luckily there was no such thing as successful repression anyway — lectured my instructor. The festering stuff was always leaking out, which the Surrealists understood, along with other leaky heroes such as Jackson Pollock, who started flinging paint at a canvas on the floor, liberating it once and for all from the falsehoods of representation and the prison of the picture plane. It was the wild men and (occasional) women who changed the world — by breaking rules, not following them! As with Pollock, who upended painting entirely, but it was his psyche that had to get released first, thanks to Jungian analysis. We pored over Jung looking for backdoors to the collective unconscious, we memorized Reich, another wild man always making another comeback for whom character was itself a kind of defense.

The point is that there was an ethics to transgression. As for us aspiring artists, our own defenses needed to be punctured too, our own inflexibilities shattered. Boundaries made us ill. Humans were armored: not only superegos but also bodies needed to be broken down and realigned. Being permeable was good for you. Another of Acconci's performances from 1970 was *Rubbing Piece*. This one involved him rubbing his left forearm with his right hand for an hour until he got a horrible

sore, his skin angry and abraded. We all needed to shed our skins, give up our self-protections.

To be sure, these skins were by default white — race wasn't yet part of the curriculum, though another of my teachers was Robert Colescott, who was at the time painting massive and funnily bitter canvases substituting African-Americans for whites in reprises of iconic history paintings (*George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware*). In quest of whatever permeability was available I underwent Roling, a sadistic form of therapeutic massage designed to dislodge and release the emotional injuries stored in your connective tissues; this entailed paying to have someone grind the heel of his hand and occasionally an elbow into the soft parts of your corpus until you cried. It really hurt. But how was anything going to get transformed socially and politically if our rigidities remained intact, bolstered by aesthetic politesse and safety-mongering?

The possibility of smashing everything, your own boundaries included, made for a wonderful political optimism. Aesthetic vanguards and political vanguards seemed like natural allies — the revolutions to come would be left-wing ones, or so we assumed. What innocent times those now seem, when "right-wing radical" was still an oxymoron. Aesthetic conservatives were political conservatives, that was the assumption. The disrupters were on the left; disruption was a left-wing idiom. It was very heady: signing on to the avant-garde linked you to a revolutionary past and future, from the barricades to Duchamp's urinals to Mai 68. Everywhere the mandate was to dismantle the art-life distinction, and to embrace whatever followed.

Yes, I do now see there were some convenient fictions embedded in the romance with transgression. For one thing, as much as we hawked dismantling the art-life boundary, we

also covertly relied on it: artistic transgressions were allowed to flourish because the aesthetic frame was itself a sort of protective shield. In 1992, in an aptly titled essay “The Aesthetic Alibi,” Martin Jay, while naming no names, gently mocked the whole genre of performance art, invented, he says, to permit behaviors that would put artists in jail or mental wards if art and life were *not* distinct realms of experience. In other words the transgressions of Acconci and his ilk coasted on the inviolability of art while getting acclaim for appearing to militate against it.



As a nineteen-year-old aspiring artist I worshipped Vito Acconci, I wanted to be Acconci, though in pictures he looked hairy and unkempt. I thought *Seedbed* was artistically brilliant. I looked up his address in the New York phone book and thought about dropping by (he lived on Christie Street, I even now recall), or maybe stalking him through the streets of New York and then documenting it — transgressing the transgressor! — to what I imagined would be art world acclaim. It wouldn’t have occurred to me to try to pull off public masturbation, even concealed under a platform; there were limits to the transgressions I could imagine.

The gender politics of transgression was not initially much on my horizon. Not that there weren’t some stellar female transgressors on the scene: there was Lynda Benglis, for example, who ran a mocking ad in *Artforum* of herself nude except for white-framed sunglasses, wielding an extra-long dildo like a phallus. (It was a commentary on the art world.) But you didn’t need to appropriate the phallus to be transgressive, you could daintily repudiate it in the manner of the

feminist artist Judy Chicago and others, who were reclaiming maligned “feminine” crafts such as china-painting and needle-point to contest the macho grandiosities of minimalism.

In some ways of telling this story, feminism and transgression were always on a collision course. For one thing, and needless to say, women’s bodies were pretty often transgression’s raw material, in art and in life, on canvas and in the bars. I recall reading the painter Audrey Flack on her first meeting with Jackson Pollock at the Cedar Tavern decades before — he pulled her toward him as if to kiss her, then burped in her face. Flack, twenty at the time, wasn’t particularly offended, she just saw him as desperate. De Kooning chopped women up on canvas, charged early feminist art historians. The artist Ana Mendieta either fell off her 33rd floor balcony or was pushed by minimalist superstar Carl Andre, who was tried for it and found not guilty.

By the time #MeToo hit, transgression’s sheen was already feeling pretty tarnished. #MeToo was about a lot of things and among them was a cultural referendum on the myth of male genius, which as thousands of first-person accounts have elaborated over the decades, is pretty frequently accompanied by sexual grabbiness and bad breath. Sexual transgressiveness has always been the perquisite of gross men in power, but there is also an added perk, which is that treating the boundaries of less powerful people as minor annoyances makes insecure men feel like creative geniuses, like artists and rock stars. Post #MeToo, the emblematic transgressor was starting to look less like Vito Acconci at Sonnabend and more like Dominique Strauss-Kahn at the Sofitel.

Apropos my young reverence for Acconci and his idioms, I didn’t at the time ponder my own real-life experiences with real-life masturbators and stalkers. A committed truant and

somewhat feral adolescent loner, I could often be found weekday afternoons in one or another of Chicago's seedy downtown movie palaces, where I would park myself in a mostly deserted theater to enjoy a double feature, or the DIY version, sitting through the same movie twice. The raincoat brigade had their plans, meaning solo men not infrequently scurrying into seats within my eyeline once the movie had started and commencing frantic activity in their laps. It took me a while to figure out what was going on — such things weren't covered in my junior high sex-ed classes. I would gather my belongings and move seats or sometimes flee to the ladies room.

Once, feeling aggrieved at having to move seats yet again, I deliberately dumped a large icy soda into the lap of a man I had taken for one of the miscreants. He yelped in outrage, which was thrilling and terrifying, though I wondered for long after whether I had possibly made a mistake. Maybe those teenage experiences of male performance art were buried somewhere in my psyche when I put together my undergraduate thesis show, a semiotic analysis of an obscene phone call I had received, accompanied by deliberately ugly staged photographs of what the caller said he wanted to do. Structuralism and semiotics were then conquering the art world and I liked the intellectual distance they provided, the tools to be cool about a hot subject. I liked the idea of transgressing the transgressor. On to grad school, triumphantly.

In the following years much of my work, even after decamping the art world, was ambivalently fascinated with transgression, sometimes the aesthetic version, sometimes the true-life exemplars. Critical theories that read real life as a "text" helped to blur the distinction, but so did everything else in the culture. I wrote about *Hustler* magazine, I wrote books devoted to adulterers, scandalizers, male miscreants, and the

professor-student romance crackdown. Though I think of myself as a generally decorous person — only ever arrested once (teenager, charges expunged) — something drew me to indiscretion and imprudence. Envy, sublimated rage, desire, male impersonation? Let me get back to you on it.



The cultural genres that have flourished in the last few decades have likewise been the ones most dedicated to muddying the art-life distinction: the memoir explosion, autofiction, the psychobiographical/pathographical doggedness in criticism, confessional standup and the heirs of Spaulding Gray, along with the relentless first-person imperatives of social media, where everyone's now a "culture worker," everyone "curates" everyday life into pleasing tableaux for public display. Which means what for the fate of transgression, whose *métier*, as Martin Jay intimated, covertly relied on keeping the distinction intact?

The concurrent notable trend has been the outperformance of the offense and umbrage sector, now overtaking pretty much everything in the cultural economy. To be sure, umbrage can be a creative force in its own right, as when in 2014 at Wellesley, a woman's college, students protested a painted bronze statue of a sleepwalking man in his underpants located outside the art museum, because it was regarded as potentially harmful to viewers. The man was balding, eyes closed, arms outstretched — not an especially imposing or threatening figure, in fact he appears quite vulnerable. A petition to move the statue inside the museum got over a thousand signatures.

Creative umbrage flourished more flamboyantly in 2013, when the Metropolitan Museum staged an exhibit of the

painter Balthus' work and included *Thérèse Dreaming*, with its notorious flash of the pubescent Thérèse's white panties smack in the center of the canvas. As to be expected, the Met attempted to accommodate offended sensibilities by posting a safety warning at the entrance to the exhibit advising that "some of the paintings in this exhibition may be disturbing to some visitors." Though the image of Thérèse is quite stylized, a petition called for the painting's removal because of "the current news headlines highlighting a macro issue about the safety and wellbeing of women of all ages." You'd have thought there was a living, breathing pubescent girl flay-legged in the museum (over eleven thousand signatures to date have concurred).

Speaking of artistic choices, I noted that the anti-Balthus petition was written in the first person, an aesthetic decision that every creative writer faces — whether or not to deploy that all-powerful "I." "When I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art this past weekend, I was shocked to see a painting that depicts a young girl in a sexually suggestive pose," it read, in bold type and melodramatic prose as aesthetically stylized as Balthus' rendering of Thérèse, the degree of effrontery so precisely calibrated. If the painting was not going to be removed, the petition-writer offered another option: the museum should provide signage indicating that "some viewers find this piece offensive or disturbing, given Balthus' artistic infatuation with young girls."

The demand was that the painting be repackaged as a cautionary tale. And since we live in culturally democratizing times, *Thérèse Dreaming* now comes swathed in lengthy explanations. From the Met's website: "Many early twentieth-century avant-garde artists, from Paul Gauguin to Edvard Munch to Pablo Picasso, also viewed adolescent sexuality as a potent site of psychological vulnerability as well as lack of

inhibition, and they projected these subjective interpretations into their work. While it may be unsettling to our eyes today, *Thérèse Dreaming* draws on this history." No longer will a viewer's eye be drawn to that glimpse of white panties and be unsettled, and wonder what to make of it. Goal to the offended, who have seized the license to be outrageous and impose their stories and desires on the polis, much as the transgressor classes once did. But let's not imagine there is any less cultural aggression or cruelty being unleashed here than before.



Trying to construct a timeline for this art-life blur, I recalled an earlier similar remonstrance, one that startled me at the time, given the source — but it now reads like a bellwether. This was Martin Amis, in his literary critic guise, grappling with what he named a "problem from hell" upon the publication in 2009 of his literary hero Nabokov's unfinished novel *The Original of Laura*. The problem wasn't precisely that the subject was the desire to sexually despoil very young girls, a preoccupation it shared with the canonical *Lolita* and four of Nabokov's other books, six in all. It was that as the aging Nabokov's talents drastically waned those "unforgivable activities" — the sexual despoiling stuff — were no longer absolved or wrestled with by the usual stylistic firepower, and what remained on the page was dismal squalor. Worse, *Laura's* stylistic failures, along with *Ada* before it — another late-career nymphet-obsessed ponderous mess — taints the other books. Even the great ones start feeling squalid by proximity, don't they?

Though Amis insists that he is making an aesthetic case and not a moral one — "in fiction, of course, nobody ever gets hurt" — as you watch him valiantly trying to pry the two

apart, the critical performance is palpably anxious. He feints, he deflects, he finally states outright that it comes down to the truism that writers like to write about the things they like to think about, and without sufficient stylistic perfume to offset the foulness of the subject matter, what Nabokov was thinking about just smells bad. But admitting this means, effectively, retracting the license to transgress that Amis (and most of the literary world) once so appreciatively granted Nabokov, leaving the critic (and the rest of us) wallowing in “a horrible brew of piety, literal-mindedness, vulgarity and philistinism.”

My own question is, what in the cultural ether pushed this anxiety to the forefront? Had the protective blockades once erected around the aesthetic become that much more porous since Nabokov’s heyday? Literary criticism has always had the sociological move up its sleeve, available to whip out and flay transgressors as necessary — Irving Howe indicting Philip Roth as bad for the Jews, and so on. But when such a prominent writer decides, so late in the day, that Nabokov is bad for pre-teens, it does seem like some major sands have shifted. Reading Amis reread Nabokov’s oeuvre through the lens of *Laura*, you notice the transgression jumping from the art to the artist, like a case of metaphysical fleas. We have left literature behind and been plummeted into the sphere of moral contagion. The anxiety isn’t just that our glimpses of the violated bodies of pubescent girls have arrived too stylistically unadorned. I wonder if it is also that whatever’s corrupt and ignoble in there will seep out and taint the reader.

If I understand him correctly Amis’ problem from hell is something like this: What if there resides at the center of this deeply transgressive oeuvre not the “miraculously fertile instability” he reveres about Nabokovian language but, rather, the rigidity of a repetition compulsion?

Is this a general condition? I’m not sure, but other such “problems from hell” certainly seem to dot the recent social landscape, especially at the art-life checkpoints. When the comedian-genius Louis C.K. was exposed as a compulsive masturbator and encroacher on women in the wake of #MeToo, it naturally brought back my long-ago teenage movie theater experiences. I was fascinated by his fellow comedian Sarah Silverman’s insouciant response. When asked by Louis if he could do it in front of her, Silverman would sometimes respond — at least so she reported — “Fuck yeah, I want to see that!” As she told it, it was a weird, interesting aesthetic experience, and she was Louis’ equal in weirdness, no one’s victim. Silverman had to quickly apologize to all the women who had not felt similarly — for one thing, it wasn’t clear that everyone upon whom this lovely sight was bestowed had been asked for permission or felt able to refuse. Pathetic C.K. may have been, but he was still a comedy gatekeeper.

Of course he’d also been telling the world for decades exactly who he was, namely a self-loathing guy who was obsessed with masturbation. He did innumerable comedy routines and episodes of various shows devoted to masturbation. Apparently many of his fans — let’s call them the aesthetic-autonomy diehards — thought this was “art,” just a “bit,” and were deeply disappointed in C.K. He was supposed to have been a feminist ally! He was supposed to be fucked up about women, but self-aware! He did comedy routines about how terrible men were at sex, and how grossly they behaved to women — and then he turned around and was gross!

The world is becoming a tough place for anyone who still wants to separate the artist from the art — then again, pretty few people any longer do. Creative writing students across the country now refuse to read Whitman, a man of the nineteenth

century who, they believe, said some racist things in addition to the great poetry. I guess reading him now feels disgusting, as though a cockroach had crawled in your ear and deposited a bunch of racism that you are helpless to expunge.



Things were much less confusing when the purists were right-wingers, when the “moral majoritarians” railed against cultural permissiveness while concealing their private transgressions behind facades of public rectitude. I loved the last few decades of the twentieth century, when one after another fundamentalist minister was exposed as a scummy lying adulterer and the world made sense. The right was still at it throughout the 1990s, waging their losing culture wars — it was almost too easy to get them to huff and puff. When none other than the reptilian Rudolph Giuliani, then mayor of New York, threatened to shut down the Brooklyn Museum in retribution for an art exhibit he deemed offensive, the museum produced a yellow stamp announcing that the work in the exhibit “may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria and anxiety.” Note that as of 1999 it was still possible to be ironic about offending people, because offended people were generally regarded as morons.

The rise of identity politics, it is widely agreed, introduced a far more granular vocabulary of umbrage. Now it is the social justice left wielding the aesthetic sledgehammers and “weaponizing” offense. (Note, for the record, that the socialist left, young and old, those for whom class remains the primary category and think identity politics is just corporate liberalism, are not particularly on board with the new umbrage.) There was already a general consensus that pernicious racial and

ethnic stereotypes have been among the factors impeding social equality for marginalized groups. The last few decades have introduced a new vocabulary of cultural must-nots: cultural appropriation, microaggression, insensitivity. New prohibitions keep being invented, and political coherence is not required. An obviously antiracist artwork like Dana Schutz’s painting *Open Casket*, which depicted Emmett Till’s mutilated face and body and was included in the Whitney Biennial in 2017, could be accused by its critics of attempting to transmute “black suffering into profit and fun,” because in the new configuration the feeling of being offended licenses pretty much anything. (Schutz had made it clear that the painting would not be sold.) Protestors blocked the painting from view and petitions demanded that it be destroyed. Offended feelings are like a warrant for the summary arrest of the perps, and prior restraint is expected: the offending thing should never have been said or seen. Culture is no longer where you go to imagine freedom, it’s where you go for scenes of crime and punishment.

Speaking of political incoherence, the irony of the charges against Schutz was the degree to which they echoed the old miscegenation codes, as if Emmett Till’s murder wasn’t itself spurred by fears and prohibitions about racial mixing. It was the “one-drop rule” in reverse, except now a white woman was being accused of crossing the color line, of positioning herself too intimately to a black male body. The extremity of the accusations made the identity politics of the left seem stylistically indistinguishable from the identity politics of the right, both spawned from the same post-truth bubble — as with Swiftboating, Pizzagating, and “Lock Her Up.” Throw some dirt around and see what sticks.

Meanwhile more terrible things have been happening.

“Transgression” has become the signature style of the alt-right and “alt-light” (those are the slightly less anti-Semitic and white supremacist ones). Now *they* are the rebellious, anti-establishment ones, gleefully offending everyone. Some even lay the blame for the stylistics of online troll culture — the alt-truth shitposting adopted so successfully by the current president and his basket of deplorables (to borrow Hillary Clinton’s supremely self-annihilating phrase) — at the doorstep of the avant-garde. In *Kill All Normies*, Angela Nagle traces their antecedents to Sade, the Romantics, Nietzsche, the Surrealists, the Situationists, the counterculture and punk — culminating with far-right culture hero Milo Yiannopoulos, who also extolled the virtues of disrupting the status quo and upsetting the liberals, whom he saw as hegemonic. All was going well for Milo, the self-proclaimed “dangerous faggot,” until he got a smidgen too dangerous by commending pedophilia, or so said his former patrons who quickly smote him into oblivion. Haha, their transgressive spirit is about an inch deep.

Yet the longstanding association of transgression with the left was always superficial and historically accidental. In Nagle’s version, the alt-right crowd have simply veered toward nihilism in lieu of revolution. She even intimates that it was the virtue-signaling and trigger warnings of the touchy-feely left that gave us Donald Trump and the rest of the destructive right-wing ids; and this has made her persona non grata in certain leftish circles. However you draw your causality arrows, there’s no doubt that the more fun the right started having, the more earnestly humorless the social justice types became, and the more aesthetically conservative. Especially problematic for the younger crowd are jokes: every comedy routine was now examined for transgressions, like a team of school nurses checking kindergarteners for head

lice. Comedy is no longer any sort of protected zone, it’s the front lines, with id-pol detectives on house-to-house searches to uncover humor offenses from decades past. Old jokes are not grandfathered in, obviously; old jokes are going to be judged by current standards. Irony has stopped being legible — it puts you on “the wrong side of history,” a phrase you suddenly hear all the time, as though history always goes in the right direction.



In sum, transgressors are the cultural *ancien regime* who have reaped the spoils for far too long, and now had better watch their steps. Even France, proud home to Sade and Genet, is dethroning its transgressors and putting them on trial. This includes that most literary of pedophiles, the award-festooned novelist Gabriel Matzneff, currently in hiding in Italy, who used to have a lot of friends in high places despite (because of?) habitually foisting his sexual desires on teenage girls and underage boys, then writing detailed accounts of his predilections. One of his former conquests, fourteen at the time of their affair, recently wrote her own bestselling book, titled *Consent*. Another, fifteen when they were involved and whose letters Matzneff appropriated and published (even putting her face on the cover of one of his novels — no, he didn’t ask permission or even inform her), has also gone public. She attempted to do so previously, in 2004, but no one then cared or would publish her account.

But it’s a new era: the transgressed-upon of the world are speaking, and the world is listening. This changes many things, profoundly. It’s been a long time coming. As to whether injury will prove a wellspring of cultural vitality or a wellspring of

platitudes and kitsch, that is what's being negotiated at the moment. At the very least, trauma is more of an equal-opportunity creative force than inspiration or talent, which were handed out far more selectively. Trauma is a bigger tent. The injury and the wound — and importantly, the socially imposed injuries of race, ethnicity, gender, queerness — have long been paths to finding a voice, an intellectual “in.” This is hardly new: wounds have long been sublimated into style or form — so argued Edmund Wilson, and before him Freud. It seems like injuries more frequently enter the cultural sphere minus the aesthetic trappings these days — perhaps there is more patience or attention for unembellished pain. The question we're left with is how much of the world can be understood from the standpoint of a personal injury: does it constrict or enlarge the cultural possibilities?

Reading about Matzneff, I'd been wondering what the French plan to do about Sade in the post -#MeToo era and was happy to stumble on an essay by Mitchell Abidor pondering the same question. An American who has translated many French avant-gardists and anarchists into English, Abidor rereads Sade through the lens of Jeffrey Epstein, concluding that it is impossible not to see Sade as Epstein's blueprint. His point is that Sade did not just fantasize on the page, he acted out what he wrote, kidnapping, sexually abusing, and torturing young girls, also numerous prostitutes, and a beggar named Rose Keller — women who supposedly didn't count, and don't count to Sade's legions of readers. Epstein's victims were, likewise, financially needy teenagers. Two sexually predatory rich guys separated by a few centuries, both monsters of privilege: Sade had his chateau, Epstein his townhouse and his island. Both were arrested and tried; both got out or escaped prison and did more of the same.

What is inexplicable for Abidor is how many of his fellow intellectuals fell under Sade's spell and became his great defenders, despite what a verbose and repetitive writer he is. They see him as an emissary of freedom — or as in Simone de Beauvoir's reading, at least it's on the itinerary. Abidor says that Sade's freedom is the freedom of a guard in a concentration camp who does what he likes to his victims because they cannot escape. It's not just the liberties of surrealism that Sade heralds, but also the death trap of fascism.

I arranged a coffee date with Abidor not long ago, wanting to meet this assassin of the avant-garde; he suggested a spot where old Brooklyn socialists congregate. He had become a despised figure on the Francophone left, he told me, glancing around nervously and spotting a few former compatriots. The old guard was furious at him for putting their revered transgressive lineage — Apollinaire, Bataille, Barthes, the heirs of Sade, to which they still cling — in such an ugly light. It is the question of our moment: who gets to play transgressor, and who is cast in the role of the transgressed upon. When transgressions — in art, in life, at the borders — repeat the same predictable power arrangements and themes, what's so experimental about that?

Yet putting it that way gives me a yucky tingle of sanctimony, a bit of the excess *amour-propre* that attends taking the “correct” position. What's left out of the anti-transgression story are the *rewards* of feeling affronted — how takedowns, shaming, “cancelling,” the toolkit of the new moral majoritarians, invent new forms of cultural sadism rather than rectifying the old ones. All in a good cause, of course: inclusiveness, equality, cultural respect — so many admirable reasons!

The truant in me resents how much cultural real estate the anti-transgressors now command, while positioning

themselves as the underdogs. Witness the new gatekeepers and moral entrepreneurs, wielding not insignificant amounts of social power while decrying their own powerlessness. And thus a new variety of hypocrite is born, though certainly no more hypocritical than the old hypocrites.

We used to know what transgression was, but that's not plausible anymore. Maybe violating boundaries was a more meaningful enterprise when bourgeois norms reigned, when liberal democracy seemed like something that would always endure. The ethos of transgression presumed a stable moral order, the disruption of which would prove beneficial. But why bother trying to disrupt things when disruption is the new norm, and permanence ever more of a receding illusion?



DAVID GROSSMAN

The Human Infinity: Literature and Peace

Writers often talk of the torments of writing, of “the fear of the blank page,” of nights waking in a cold sweat because suddenly they see the weaknesses, the vulnerabilities, of the story that they have been writing, sometimes for years. This distress is certainly real, but I insist also upon the pleasures of creation, of inventing an entire fictional world out of thousands of facts and details. There is a particular kind of wonder that I feel when a character I have invented begins to overtake me, to run ahead and pull me forward: suddenly this imagined character knows more than I do about its own fate, its own future, and also about other characters in the story, and I must learn to follow, to catch