

The ‘Heron’: Nine Steps for a Past Life.

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Abstract

In *Farewell to the Working Class* (1982),¹ André Gorz (1923-2007)² offers the reader ‘Nine Theses for a Future Left’. Here I borrow and play with this nomenclature for a series of reflections on the two volumes which constitute Gorz’s most personal writings and which book-end, so to speak, his *oeuvre*: *The Traitor* and *Letter to D. A Love Story*. More precisely, this is a viewing of the former text *through the lens of* the latter. The ‘steps’ presented here are not those of a linear path and progression but rather, like steps in a dance, move backwards and forwards, turn and circle, trace and retrace ephemeral patterns. In following in such steps, I contrast Gorz’s account of the self with another set of explicitly *non*-autobiographical autobiographical writings, those of the German Critical Theorist Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). Central to both writers is an understanding of particular traumatic experiences and past catastrophes, and an abiding concern with overcoming contemporary alienation through play and dance, love and eros.

Key words: André and Dorine Gorz, alienation, Eros, *The Traitor*, *Letter to D.*, autobiography, Critical Theory, Walter Benjamin

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“The most fundamental truths are always discovered through individual situations. This does not mean they are individual.” (André Gorz, 1989: 165).

“Love is always asocial and always spells danger for a totalitarian order” (André Gorz, 1989: 284).

“Civilisation arises from pleasure: we must hold fast to this thesis in all its provocativeness” (Herbert Marcuse, 1956).

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¹ A work dedicated to Dorine.

² Gorz’s was born on 9th February but there is some disagreement as to the year: Lodziak and Tatman (1997: 13) give it as 1924, as does the back of *The Traitor*; on the jacket of *Letter to D.*, and elsewhere, however, it is given as 1923.

I *The art of the photograph*

They are going to die. They are dead already. She will eventually become terminally ill. He will not want to live on without her. And so, many years later when they are both well into their eighties, this couple will choose to take lethal injections and never wake up again. They will die together; they will be found together on the morning of 24th September 2007 at their home in Vosnon, Aube, a village some 150 kilometres to the south-east of Paris. Looking at the photograph on the front cover of *Letter to D. A Love Story*,³ one becomes a practitioner of that very “prophecy in reverse” identified by Roland Barthes in his masterpiece of mourning, *Camera Lucida* (1993).⁴ And just as the intervention of death is the *punctum* of the so-called ‘Wintergarden’ photograph⁵ that ‘pierces’ and ‘wounds’ the bereaved Barthes, so this cover image, too, punctures the viewer and creates an exquisite pain. It is an enchanting picture – bittersweet, poignant. Two people full of life and love for each other, holding each other, lost in each other, dancing together. He smiles dreamily, eyes closed. Her head slightly tilted, looking up; she is laughing a little. No details are given as to where or when it was taken, or by whom. It is in Paris somewhere, presumably. It was taken a lifetime ago. It is enough to say that it attests to a past moment, preserves that instance of the then-and-there for the reader in the here-and-now: *ça a été*, the ‘that has been’ which for Barthes constitutes the very essence, the *noème*, of photography (Barthes, 1993: 80). And like the ‘Wintergarden’ photograph in *Camera Lucida* – or rather, absent from *Camera Lucida* – it is not to be reproduced here. It will be, nevertheless, the unseen point around which everything that follows revolves, circles, dances.

One should never judge a book by its cover, we are told, but what about its author? Is one entitled to draw any conclusions from a photograph of the writer which graces, as this one does, his final book? We know that physical appearances, like book covers, are deceptive. So, there is probably little to be gleaned, to be gained, from even the most playful exercise in

³ I am referring here to the cover of Julia Rose’s English-language translation published by Polity Press in 2009.

⁴ Published under the title *La Chambre Claire* in 1980, Barthes’s study was written, coincidentally, as a homage to Jean-Paul Sartre’s *L’Imaginaire*. For what Gerhard Richter terms Barthes’s “thanatographical reflections on the photographic image” (Derrida 2010: xxx) see especially Barthes 1993: 87 and 94-96.

⁵ A photograph Barthes finds of his recently deceased mother as a young girl wearing a white dress standing in a wintergarden. Tellingly, this image does not appear in *Camera Lucida*.

photographic physiognomy. But looking at this image there is a fundamental question, a central contradiction, which demands attention.

How one is to reconcile such a picture of the Austrian-born André Gorz (né Gerhart Hirsch) dancing with his English-born wife, Dorine (né Doreen Kerr) with the figure who emerges unwillingly from – or, better, who seeks to disappear into – the self-excoriating pages of his first book, the quasi-autobiographical auto-interrogation *The Traitor* (1989, [*Le traître*, 1958])? True, there is much in his features and stance that chimes with the non-descript description he provides of himself there: “a thin fellow with hollow cheeks and eyes, receding forehead and chin, a long neck poking forward over his slightly hunched back, with the gait of a heron and parsimonious gestures, as if he was trying to contain his being within himself” (1989: 67).⁶ Indeed, one can discern a certain angular and awkward uprightiness; a slight stooping to compensate for his height; one can even imagine his “parsimonious gestures” – a patient watchfulness, a propensity for stillness and silence, a penchant for blending into the background, a reluctance to attract attention. One might imagine, then, that dancing did not come easily to him, though perhaps he was, contrary to such expectations, light on his feet and graceful.⁷ He was certainly not averse to dancing. On their first two dates together, he recalls, he and Dorine went dancing.⁸ And so here, notwithstanding the monochrome of this old photograph, our “Heron” seems transformed: no more drab grey feathers, no longer an unprepossessing, inconspicuous figure, but rather one of joyous kingfisher colours – a heron to be sure, but of a rare kind: an agami heron perhaps, the ‘hummingbird heron’ of Brazil.

On this evidence his encounter with and love for ‘Kay,’ the pseudonym he chose for Dorine in *The Traitor*, was indeed transformative, life-changing, turning the ‘traitor’ inside-out to become a double-agent affirming life. It is just one moment of this remarkable metamorphosis – of self-discovery and self-realisation *with* and *through* an other – that is captured in this photograph. It is a romantic portrayal: not just in the sense of depicting two

⁶ This description is also cited at the start of the ‘lengthy Foreword’ by Jean-Paul Sartre (see Gorz, 1989: 1). Conversely, why Gorz refers to Sartre as ‘Morel’ (a kind of mushroom!) is less apparent.

⁷ By contrast, Gorz notes that one of his first impressions of Dorine was the way she walked “like a dancer” (2009: 5).

⁸ See Gorz 2009: 5-7.

people in love, but in the wider sense of *roman*, of a narrative, of a story unfolding, of a life, a *self* unfurling. It is a telling image. It is an image of an imago. It is a work of art.⁹

II *A dance lesson*

Dancing does not figure prominently in the writings of Critical Theory, the tradition through which, as here, I am bound to view the proximate, intimately related works of Gorz.¹⁰ And when it does feature, dance is seldom treated generously or kindly. The mimetic and cultic origins of dance as ritualized and playful bodily re-enactments of Nature are briefly noted in two of Walter Benjamin's lesser known fragments from 1933.¹¹ In his scornful essays on jazz and popular music – precisely the kind of simple, unpretentious music one imagines André and Dorine dancing to here – Theodor W. Adorno denigrates jitterbugging and syncopation as kinds of bodily pathology or mania, as infantilization and as forms of conformist adjustment.¹² Siegfried Kracauer is more attentive though scarcely less critical: in his 1925 essay 'Travel and Dance', for example, dancing to jazz is ultimately seen as a form of futile escapism, as the search for another time and place, for an elusive alterity.¹³ The mere marking of time and rhythm has now come to substitute for those pleasures – "pleasant flirtation, a tender encounter in the realm of the sensuous" (Kracauer, 1995: 66) – of former

⁹ Sartre in his 'Foreword' notes: "art is a motionless image of movement; when you begin reading a novel, even confessions, everything has long since been consummated, 'before' and 'after' are nothing but operative signs, the dawn of love and its death agony exist simultaneously, each spread out upon the other, in the eternal indistinction of the moment; to read is to make a time transfusion; the hero lives on our life, his ignorance of the future and the dangers that surround him are our own; it is with our patience as readers that he creates for himself a parasitic duration whose course we break off and resume as we please" (Gorz, 1989: 2).

¹⁰ For a consideration of Gorz's relation with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, see the article by Neal Harris, Javier Zamora Garcia and Lucy Ford (2023) in this collection.

¹¹ See his 'Doctrine of the Similar' and 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (in Benjamin, 1999: 694-698 and 720-22 respectively).

¹² See, for example, Adorno's famous 1938 essay 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' in Adorno 1991: 29-60. On 'jitterbugging' see also the essay 'Perennial Fashion – Jazz' in Bronner and Kellner eds. 1989: 199-209 especially page 206.

¹³ See Kracauer 1995: 65-73. Gorz himself is more appreciative of such escapist longings: "All of us dream of being elsewhere and Other than we are" (1989: 268). Indeed, such 'being elsewhere' is interwoven with falling in love: "What captivated me about you," he writes in *Letter to D.*, "was that you opened the door to another world for me. ... That world enchanted me. I could leave the real world behind and be someone else, without ties or obligations. With you, I was *elsewhere*, in a foreign place, foreign to myself" [italics in original] (2009: 9).

times and modes of dancing. Two years later, in his famous essay ‘The Mass Ornament’,¹⁴ Kracauer sees in the synchronized routines of the Tiller Girls dance troupe a fetishism of geometrical patterns, machinic functioning and abstractness for its own sake. De-individualized, de-personalized and de-eroticized, the dancing body is integrated through, and aestheticized as, the uniformity and conformity of the modern mass. For Critical Theory, dance and dancers are mimetic, euphoric, ecstatic, escapist, mechanistic, disenchanting, disciplined and docile. But the dancers pictured here, André and Dorine, embody something else, something rather more humble and quotidian, more ad hoc. The photograph bespeaks a quiet simplicity, a humility, an ease, a gentleness, a conviviality and mutuality. They are not dressed up for some special occasion; there is no formality here. This is dance as incidental and intimate. One imagines a small café; a spontaneous invitation to take to the floor; a momentary hesitation and then a ‘*Oui, why not.*’¹⁵ Such dancing is not only ‘romantic’, it is ludic, playful. It is redolent precisely of those lost flirtations and sensuous pleasures lamented by Kracauer; and this photograph has captured and preserved such a fleeting moment, the ‘that-has-been’ of happiness. It is an undamaged moment from what had been hitherto, for André at least, a damaged life. It is what Benjamin might describe as a ‘wish image’ or ‘dream image’.

But why dwell on such things? Why focus on the personal, the biographical and speculative, when the work of this man, André Gorz, seems to be so prescient and so pressing today: for the various paths taken in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were certainly *not* those to paradise, but rather to the obscene inequalities and injustices of global neoliberal capitalism; to a polarized society of ever richer financiers and technocrats attended upon by a proliferation of precarious ‘new servants’; to the pervasive insecurities and impoverishments attending the so-called ‘gig’ economy and zero hours contracts disfiguring the lives of the ‘non-working non-class’; to technological innovations at speeds and on scales unprecedented, but only ushering in ever longer working hours, lower pay, fewer benefits, and less bargaining power; to the ceaseless destruction of Nature as the economic ‘logic’ of ‘growth’ inevitably trumps ‘ecological rationality’ despite the climate catastrophe accelerating before us.

¹⁴ See Kracauer 1995: 75-86.

¹⁵ Indeed, this was, as Gorz recalls, Dorine’s response to the invitation to go dancing together on the 23rd October 1947, their first date (2009: 5).

Amid these multiple and interwoven catastrophes of the present, why waste so many words on an old photograph and a forgotten evening?¹⁶ My response is this: at the core of Gorz's work is a profound and enduring concern with individual existence and experience – above all as encapsulated and articulated in the Marxist concept of alienation¹⁷ – and with the concomitant possibilities, not so much of wholly eradicating and finally overcoming the suffering of such estrangement, but of effecting its diminution in the everyday world, its minimization, its reduction to the momentary. In his radical politics of time, Gorz looks to how alienated life – those times spent wasting our time – can and must be confined to a few fleeting instances. Put another way: how can those moments of autonomy – when we can be truly ourselves, truly human, when we experience a non- alienated existence – be expanded, multiplied, shared, celebrated. Such moments are indeed few and precious; moments of freedom, of love, of eros. The photograph gracing the cover of *Letter to D* is one of them. Yes, they are going to die; yes, they are dead already. But once, before this, as this photograph attests, they were alive – yes, really alive – and dancing together.

Indeed, dancing, here, is not just living, but learning to live; it is pedagogic: “to be able to enjoy the passing moment, a light, an aroma, a look, a sound; to hold on to life, to want it to be full of all there is to be lived, including contradictions and risks that cannot be escaped – I am learning. I would not let anyone live it in my place” (Gorz 1989: 264). This photograph is not just instructive; it is the very image of a sentimental education, a lesson in living and loving together, in the joy of *conviviality*, in the “*joie de vivre*” (Gorz, 1989: 276).

¹⁶ One reason is because few other commentators do: two notable exceptions are Laura Marcus's (1992) review and the chapter ‘Victim and Accomplice’ in Lodziak and Tatman's (1997: 10-30) critical introduction.

¹⁷ In the 1983 interview with Martin Jander and Rainer Maischein forming the ‘Afterword’ to *The Traitor*, Gorz stresses the centrality of alienation not just to Marxist analysis but to Western philosophy: “We must look at the question of the history of the individual subject's relationship to the body, to the environment, to society, and whether this relationship can ever be formed in such a way that I can view it as ‘my own’. Here, the question of alienation and whether it is possible to overcome it arises. For me, philosophy is not Hegel or those great creators of philosophical systems but the attempt to understand, to discover oneself and what one is, to take control of, liberate and control oneself. Life, especially human life, is self-creation, ‘autopoiesis’ (1989: 274). For an extended elaboration of Gorz's understanding of alienation see 1989: 257.

III *Being nothingness*

In his 'Berlin Chronicle' and 'A Berlin Childhood Around 1900', Walter Benjamin's reflections on his early life written in the early 1930s just as he was about to leave Germany for exile in Paris, one finds a curious yet explicit denial of the autobiographical character of these writings. He writes:

Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities (1999: 612).

The recollections of Gorz in *The Traitor*, while quite extensive, also amount to something other than an autobiography, even if these do have more of the temporal, the sequential and the continuous about them than Benjamin's remembrances. For what remains missing is precisely the 'flow of life': Gorz's text is much less to do with the expression of his life, of his being, than with his nullity, his non-entity, his inauthenticity as a human being. Indeed, one might say that *The Traitor* constitutes the very antithesis, the negative, of the autobiographical – no self (*auto*); no life (*bios*); no representation (*graphos*). Or, at least, only the paradoxical representation of a nothing, of a void, the presence and presentation of an absence. This is only the merest outline, perhaps a silhouette, of himself.

In its pages, Gorz subjects himself to the most excruciating and unflinching interrogation, disappearing into the third person, becoming an objectionable object of scrutiny, assuming an 'ant-like' existence (see 1989: 266). Indeed, he is less the subject of these ruminations than the 'subjected-to', a living body laid out for a forensic investigation into alienation – alienation understood here both as suffering estrangement from the truly human, and as Othering, as the suffering-of-Othering and of being Other.

From this abject figure, or *figurelessness*, Gorz looks to make some sense of himself and his humiliations and in so doing, to bring himself forth, to compose himself. He does so in two intimately interconnected ways: through theory; and, through writing.

While Benjamin's (non-)autobiographical writings see the dispersal of the self across places and spaces – seductive city streets and tedious bourgeois domestic interiors – Gorz dissects, or bisects, himself along two intellectual traditions, two competing and contrasting

philosophical anthropologies: psychoanalysis and Marxism.¹⁸ Freud furnishes him with an understanding of his individual ‘complexes’ and ‘condition’ – his inability to live up to the expectations of a weak father and overbearing mother, his speech impediments and eventual silences;¹⁹ above all, his fundamental shame at his dual identity or rather dual non-identity (half Austrian Catholic, half Jewish) which sets him apart and marks him as an outsider, as irredeemably Other. And it is Marx who provides the fundamental reading of those historical and social circumstances into which he was born, though not of his own choosing, and which exacerbate and intensify such perceived inadequacies and insecurities – the stultifying patterns and habits of bourgeois life; post-imperial Austria and the prevailing conditions of Viennese politics and culture in the 1930s; the rise of anti-Semitism and National Socialism. In a society marked by increasingly virulent and violent forms of anti-Semitic hatred, the young Gerhart Hirsch is only able to turn this cruelty and vindictiveness back upon himself. Seeing himself Othered by others, by his peers and classmates – those stronger, more powerful, more popular than he is – he can do no more than adopt *their view of him*, make such contempt his very own, and thereby, if nothing else, appease them by at least sharing in something, even it is their very loathing of him. It is in the dialectical interplay of these compelling forces and forms – psychoanalytic, historical materialist – that he emerges, or rather, more precisely, submerges, seeks to hide himself and remain hidden, to avoid the gaze and attention of his peers, to make himself innocuous and invisible, to shrivel up into nothingness.

It is with this dialectics of the self – ontogenetic and sociogenic – that Gorz begins to position and looks to posit himself. And as he reflects upon himself, so he comes to reflect upon the very paradigms he vainly hopes will illuminate his unhappiness. In so doing, he directs psychoanalysis to wider social conditions and orients historical materialism to the experiences and fate of the individual. Since for the psychoanalyst the internal complexes of the infant and child are rooted in the family – that is to say, in a very particular structuring and organisation of the patriarchal family overdetermined by the logics of prevailing

¹⁸ “[A]lthough they are on different levels,” Marxism and psychoanalysis serve to, “explain man by his condition (material, infantile),” Gorz observes (1989: 80).

¹⁹ Gorz notes that as a child “his strabismus, his lisp and his childish stutterings” led to “a terror of saying anything at all”. He adds: “They corrected his strabismus with glasses, his lisp with a metal hoop, his stammer by mechanical exercises, and he spoke perfectly” but too quietly and in such a low voice that “they nicknamed him ‘Mumbler’ (*Nuschler*)” (see Gorz 1989: 250-251). Sartre also refers to him by this soubriquet at the start of his ‘Foreword’ (Gorz 1989: 1).

economies, politics, legal frameworks, social and cultural mores – psychoanalysis itself must go beyond the complexes and complexities of the individual and individual psyche, must recognise that it *only* has relevance as a radical critique of the existing society. And, conversely, the collective transformation of the world so as to free and realize human species-being, the ambition of Marx, must also involve liberation from the manifold repressions and traumas besetting the individual from infancy. Deeply rooted in childhood experiences, Gorz understands his own emptiness, his nothingness, as the inability to make himself, to produce himself. Here, *alienation* is understood in a very particular way: not as the extraction of surplus value in the capitalist labour process and the organisation of commodity production, but rather as bound up the most fundamental human ‘work’, that is to say, the continual making and remaking of the self, the constitution of the subject.

Thus, Gorz begins *The Traitor* with a search both to rethink and to combine Freud and Marx in a move that positions him close to two of his contemporaries: the Herbert Marcuse of *Eros and Civilisation* and the Frantz Fanon of *Black Skins, White Masks*. Indeed, the connections here are manifold: Gorz presents himself as a bearer of the “unhappy consciousness” (1989: 188),²⁰ as one who sees and values himself only in terms of how others regard and other him, as a figure of refusal.²¹ But for Gorz the conjoining of these ill-suited paradigms is not enough, or rather it is only his starting point – they do not add up to and are less than the sum of their parts.²² What is lacking is, partly, to be found elsewhere – in an existentialism that explores the possibilities of and for human autonomy and freedom, one he will encounter in the writings and person of ‘Morel’.²³ It is ‘Morel’ – Sartre – who will prove the catalyst, prompting and giving purpose to his ambition to write and/or write out the self, a self that

²⁰ Gorz writes scathingly of this itself as an indulgence: “The historically unhappy consciousness deepens its historical unhappiness by perceiving in it the sign of consciousness’s ontological unhappiness. It glorifies in this unhappiness” (1989: 188).

²¹ Out of a combination of resentment and defiance, “He arrogantly refused everything that in any way was refused him” Gorz notes: nationality, friendship, solidarity, family, the academy were all part of this ‘refusal’.

²² One might say, borrowing Adorno’s comment on the relationship between art and popular culture in a 1936 letter to Benjamin, that for Gorz psychoanalysis and Marxism are “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up” (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999: 130).

²³ ‘Morel’ is everything that Gorz is not, the very image of a man of which Gorz is only the photographic negative. Gorz writes: “this man ‘loved life’ – that is, loved work, resistance overcome, things and people – that he had a horror of abstract ideas, that for him philosophy had to correspond to a search, a personal need, in order to contain an ounce of truth, and that it was this search by which a man tries to create a path for himself that interested him, and not the fact that a man wrote or thought skilfully” (1989: 215).

both (re)produces and wholly consumes itself in the very act of being inscribed on paper. And there will be two other transformative moments and experiences: becoming a writer, and meeting Kay (Dorine).²⁴ He, Gorz, will embrace journalism, a form of writing much more in accordance with his penchant for the concrete and the everyday, with the very flow of life itself; and he will encounter and embrace love. He will write; he will dance. Dance, here, is *autopoiesis*, poetry in motion.

Gorz starts, not dispersed across concrete spaces, but dissolved by and into philosophical ideas, distracted by abstraction and theory, spread out not over the Berlin cityscape but over pages of text. *The Traitor* lays bare, records and documents the slow and painful processes of self-recognition and self-formation through which Gorz moves – not progressively or incrementally, but in fits and starts, with many detours, deviations, digressions and dead ends – from being an object othered by others to being something akin to a subject. At first, it is more like the creation of a fictional character, a ‘he’ who exists only as a figment of textuality – and indeed there is something of this that persists to the end of the book. Nevertheless, it is only through this painful process of writing that Gorz reconfigures this condition of third person nullity (‘he’) to first person actuality (‘I’) for to overcome alienation is precisely to overcome one’s sense of estrangement, of oneself as ‘other’. Writing the self is here configured as the *writing of the self into being*; writing as *becoming* – writing as diagnostics, writing as cure. Gorz looks to compose himself, to conjure himself. But such writing is neither a simple nor safe site for self-discovery and disclosure; it is also at the same time another practice of self-effacement and concealment, a chance to adopt aliases and pseudonyms, pen names to hide behind.²⁵ Writing is another mode of incompleteness and dissatisfaction, the failure to put into words what was meant to be said, the impossibility of getting it right. And so *The Traitor* is rightly understood as an essay – as a try, an attempt, an opening. No more, no less. As we will see, for Gorz this means that it is not a work of art; it is not a letter.

²⁴ See Gorz 1989: 212. Here he mentions three transformative encounters / events: his first meeting with ‘Morel’ in Switzerland in June 1946; “his discovery of reality through journalism”; and, the end of his relationship with L. However, it is actually the start of his relationship with Kay (i.e. Dorine) – “a spring day in 1948 when I said ever to Kay” – that is most significant. This is one of several points he is at pains to correct in *Letter to D*. *The Traitor* is, most notably, a betrayal of Dorine – and *Letter to D* is his public confession.

²⁵ André Gorz was, of course, not the first pen name he adopted: others included Gérard Horst and Michel Bosquet.

IV *The artfulness of the child*

Let us stay a moment longer with our comparison between Gorz and Benjamin. The correspondences between a German-Jewish bourgeois Berlin childhood around 1900 and an Austrian-Jewish bourgeois Viennese one around 1930 are illuminating.²⁶ In 1932 Benjamin was writing about his formative years just as Gorz was living his. Both accounts deserve the epithet ‘nostalgic’ though not in the way usually applied to reflections and recollections penned in and /or filtered through the experience of exile. No, for both writers nostalgia is not a form of homesickness, a pining for a lost home and a lost time; rather it is the pain occasioned by the very remembering of that home and of those early years. The relative comforts of middle-class domesticity are experienced as suffocation and boredom, as dutiful adherence to the petty manners of the bourgeois family, as the insufferable burden of parental expectations.²⁷ Childhood itself is understood in retrospect as a time of, and therefore as a preparation for, unhappiness; as an apprenticeship in alienation.²⁸

Significantly, both Benjamin and Gorz seek to escape the stultifying and controlling realm of adults, finding refuge in re-imagining and reconfiguring their own world in relation to objects, to nature and to time. They take possession of these, and are in turn possessed by them. In childhood games of hide-and-seek, Benjamin re-enchants the bourgeois interior not only by transforming its fusty, dusty spaces into secret sites of exploration and expectation, but also, by becoming an object among the objects, shaping his body to stand still behind doorways, crouch under tables and chairs, vanish behind curtains, become part of the furniture.²⁹ The child, for Benjamin, is an exponent of that same mimetic faculty, the propensity for copying things, for imitating the environment, from which dance emerges.

²⁶ Such correspondences are perhaps not surprising. Gorz himself makes no claims to the uniqueness of his early years, indeed quite the opposite: “the despair of youth (bourgeois youth)” he writes, his own personal despair “had nothing exceptional about it” (1989: 164-165).

²⁷ Gorz writes: “His entire childhood was spent under this tyranny of identification, for he was always required to identify himself with the role, with the ego his mother wanted him to play and necessarily imputed to him because that was how she wanted to see him” (1989: 252).

²⁸ Gorz reflects: “one never altogether rids oneself of one’s childhood. It remains as the initial given situation. It does not explain everything; it explains only the affective colouring of the present” (1989: 76).

²⁹ See the section ‘Hiding Places’ in Benjamin 2002: 375-6. See also Benjamin 1996: 465-466.

Dance is a form of playfulness, a magical activity. Gorz, too, recalls his own games of concealment and invisibility³⁰ as part of “his immemorial taste for annihilation,” but these have a far more disturbing, violent quality to them involving “an encounter between infantile complexes and adolescent and adult problems which the child could in no way anticipate” (1989: 41) and culminating in forms of self-harm which anticipate all the same.³¹ And like Benjamin, this retreat into the realm of things goes far beyond their potential use as hideouts and camouflage. For Benjamin, the child is also an assembler of the most diverse artefacts, a collector and collator of an eclectic world of objects, miscellany not of any particular use or special value, but rather of endlessly playful possibilities and infinitely imaginative orderings. There are critical, indeed utopian, intimations here: the child borrows things from the instrumental logics of purpose and exchange, redeems and sets them free in new and unforeseen relationships and configurations, produces a new world of materiality in miniature.³² Once again, Gorz’s reflections on this theme of childhood collecting have a darker aspect – there is little redemption here, only an asceticism and a “mania” carried over into adulthood.³³ True, he writes of himself as a preserver of things, a keeper of the unwanted and obsolete, but this is configured as the work of the hoarder who wastes nothing, who sees nothing as waste.

Benjamin and Gorz share a profound and particular appreciation of the object-world of the child in opposition to the universe ruled over by adults.³⁴ But their understandings of this,

³⁰ Gorz notes: “at four or five he was already hiding under couches, tables, the piano, disappearing behind curtains or into closets; he would huddle into dark corners and make believe he was a tiny animal, fallen out of someone’s hand or pocket, whom no-one wanted, and then he would cry to himself quietly, comfortably, full of self-pity” (1989: 41).

³¹ Gorz goes on to detail increasingly extreme and bizarre acts such as hitting his head against the wall, pulling out and eating his own hair, licking dog excrement from his shoes (see 1989: 41).

³² See Benjamin 1996: 465.

³³ Gorz notes: “although he lives in disorder, his possessions have a secret arrangement for him, an order, a ‘me-ness’ as Morel called it, by which he insists on being surrounded” (1989: 63).

³⁴ And it is not only to the realm of objects that the child is drawn, seeking to make it his own or to be owned by it. For both Benjamin and Gorz, there is a close affinity, too, to Nature, to animals. Benjamin, for example, recounts his attraction to the neglected corners of the Berlin zoo and particular animals whose caged lives provides him with a metaphor for his own predicament as the comfortable but unwilling inmate of the bourgeois home (see 2002: 365-6). Gorz reflects on how his own fondness for animals and concern for their welfare constitutes yet another disavowal of the society of humans. In the grand conflict of Culture and Nature, he professes an allegiance and loyalty to the animal domain since,

what they tease out from this both then and in retrospect, are rather different. For Benjamin, the playfulness of the child-as-collector is a model of potentialities that contradict and confound bourgeois adult life. Such play serves as an image of a critical practice of redemption. Little Walter builds a sanctuary for things (an aesthetic intervention). For Gorz, the child-as-hoarder is a figure of frugality, of making-do with very little, part of his wider strategy of minimization and disappearance. Little Gerhart creates a hideaway where he can mete out his own self-punishment, a refuge where he can continue to refuse himself (an ascetic cell).

The child's experience of time is also of interest here. Gorz's later writings are preoccupied with the articulation of a radical politics of time, with the distribution of hours between autonomous and heteronomous activities, between the time of the self and self-realisation and the time of the other and self-estrangement (alienation). The early intimations of such concerns may be discerned in *The Traitor*. The unrelenting clock time of the school day finds expression in Benjamin as he relives his terrors of the lesson bell ringing and petrifying him as he hastens across the playground, marking him out as a dawdler, as a latecomer: "tardy".³⁵ Being in the wrong place at the wrong time is a humiliation that leaves you standing out – in the cold, in full view. One might expect something similar in Gorz. But for him, it is a matter of the school calendar, the course of days rather than hours. His childhood fear is not so much of daily belatedness and embarrassment but rather of the dwindling of days themselves, the slow but irresistible approach of the end of the holidays and the resumption of school routines. Such an accounting and counting down of time become interwoven for Gorz even in childhood with deeper existential worries and anxieties about the passing of life itself, about mortality and the days that are left to him and to his family. Even as a child, as a youth, he had an uncanny sense that time was running out, a fear intensified and justified by the traumatic and defining experiences in Vienna: a series of episodes of anti-Semitic bullying and victimization to which he himself was subjected and to which he bore witness. It is to these moments, these defining situations, that we now turn.

notwithstanding its domination by the human world, it persists as the most profoundly 'other'.

³⁵ See Benjamin 2002: 354. In the 'Berlin Chronicle' Benjamin recalls "the school clock that held sway above our heads" and "the invisible bars of our timetable cage" (1999: 602).

V *The (self-)destructive character*³⁶

They were a pair of lovers who, choosing to die together, took their own lives. They were found together. I am speaking here not of André and Dorine but of Fritz Heinle and Rika Seligson, two young friends of Walter Benjamin whose suicides on 8th August 1914 were a desperate protest at the outbreak of war. They were discovered at the little Meeting House used as a debating chamber by the Berlin Free Students Union of which Benjamin was president. This event stands as the central defining moment of Benjamin's *Berlin Chronicle*³⁷ and with good reason: their deaths may have saved his life. His shock and distress at this self-sacrifice ensured that, despite his initial enthusiasm for volunteering and the pro-war rhetoric of his former teacher and mentor Gustav Wyneken, he was never to enlist in the Imperial German Army and thus escaped the bloodbath of the trenches. When eventually called up, he feigned sciatica and, as Gorz would do twenty years later, crossed the border into neutral Switzerland to sit out the war years.

Gorz, too, recalls his own traumatic, transformative moments. Two of these stand out by reason of making him stand out – two decisive situations indicative of the growing anti-Semitism of Austrian society in the late 1930s as 'Anschluss' with Nazi Germany draws near. The first: Gorz is taunted by some of his classmates and accused of being a Jew.³⁸ The second: on a spring day in 1938, sitting on his bicycle, he witnesses in a nearby street "his first image of the pogrom" (1989: 85) – the abuse and humiliation of two Jewish women, a mother and daughter, by a man swaggering about in the uniform of the SA, a bully and the very "incarnation of arrogant power" (1989: 85) who makes them wash his car as an approving crowd looks on.³⁹

Gorz responds to these disturbing events in two different but connected ways: firstly, he seeks to make himself wholly inconspicuous, invisible, through the cultivation a kind of exemplary *ordinariness*, through adherence to routines and habits that are not his own, to fit

³⁶ In a 1931 essay, Benjamin writes of the eponymous destructive character: "The destructive character lives from the feeling not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble" (1999: 542).

³⁷ See Benjamin 1999: 603-606. See also Benjamin 1996: 464.

³⁸ Gorz recalls: "One day – he was seven or eight – they were walking home from school past a fence where someone had posted up a lot of fly bills with human heads, faces with big, fleshy arched noses, drooling mouths and *paissl* curling down the cheeks, and Felix said, 'That's your father.' 'My father doesn't look like that,' he said. Felix laughed and said, 'Oh yes he does because he's a Jew!' And Borck burst out laughing ..." (1989: 41-42)

³⁹ See Gorz 1989: 85-88.

himself perfectly and precisely into the moulds that others have created for him, to make of himself nothing more nor less than what is expected. Here the very idea of being “ordinary” takes on extraordinary significance for him,⁴⁰ becoming a watchword of, a mantra for, his obsequiousness and cowardice, for his “voluntary conformism” and “mechanized, ritualized behaviour” (Gorz 1989: 68 and 71). By “replacing the lived project, the obligation to live, with rules, schedules, rigorous systematic tasks which are always gratuitous because stripped of any real and internal necessity,” (1989: 70) Gorz hoped to create a protective shell for himself to hide within, a “carapace of routines” eminently suitable for a petty bureaucratic functionary, the borrowed manners and demeanour of “a good official of the Planning Ministry or the Population Service” (1989: 71).⁴¹ To vanish into ordinariness, to become an Everyman,⁴² a no-one in particular – this would prove an enduring preoccupation for Gorz until his encounter with Kay.

Secondly, this active pursuit of ‘fitting in’ with others leads him to embrace and emulate them. He does not repudiate those who abuse him for his Jewish paternity, but rather looks to adopt their prejudices and make them his own, despising himself and his family. Gorz does not spare himself here, he makes no excuses for his such inclinations and choices. He admits that he admired those whom he considered strong; he chose to side with the powerful. In his brazen cruelty, the uniformed SA man impresses him. Yes, he may have pitied the two women, but he did not want to be or become the pitying kind. His malicious school ‘friends’ are a model for him – a model of physical vitality and endurance, of sporting prowess and athleticism, of a simple-minded self-assurance that is the very antithesis of the feeble bookishness and intellectualism he saw in his father and in the Judaism he embodied. Longing for the affirmation of his peers far more than the approbation of his father, Gorz confesses that he wished for a different father altogether – not one poring over petty accounts

⁴⁰ See Gorz 1989: 68.

⁴¹ The reference to bureaucratic officials here is neither coincidental nor insignificant. It returns us to Kracauer and his 1929 study of Berlin’s burgeoning sector of white-collar workers or ‘salaried masses,’ *Die Angestellten*. Lacking both bourgeois status and proletarian solidarity, these petit bourgeois classes were envisioned by Kracauer as ‘spiritually shelterless’ and as such, highly susceptible to the illusions of a national *Volksgemeinschaft* peddled in Nazi propaganda (see Kracauer 1998).

⁴² Gorz is only too aware of the self-deception and arrogance involved in such thinking here: such working at ‘ordinariness’ is only required because he is inwardly wholly convinced of himself as anything but ordinary. Ordinariness is merely playacting, yet another shameful part of his inauthenticity.

and business papers, but a man of action, a *masculine* man.⁴³ And to make such a man of himself, he recounts how he sought not just to equal but to outdo his peers in physical pursuits, to become acknowledged by them and accepted as one of them. He wants to join in, *to be allowed to join in*. And so, as the German military convoys roll into Vienna in 1938, Gorz is to be found there among the cheering crowd with his arm raised in salute.⁴⁴ And the very next day he goes to the stationary shop to buy a swastika badge – “he chose a large one” (1989: 91) for the green lapel of his little Tyrolean jacket, though he felt uneasy about wearing it. The young Gorz was a fellow traveller; he did not stand up bravely for the weak but stood by as yet another “spectator” of their obloquy. His story is not one of heroic resistance but of craven complicity.⁴⁵ And he makes no excuses, offers no mitigation. He is, of course, not alone in this internalization of a highly stigmatized identity and concomitant admiration for the power and violence of the powerful and violent, this aspiration of the oppressed and dispossessed to be like their oppressors.⁴⁶

For Gorz, this execrable emulation of the ‘Aryan’ and denial of his Jewishness is perhaps his first and certainly most heinous act of treachery. His second will be to unjustly malign ‘Kay’, to dismiss her as a pathetic and needy figure when all along it was merely his own helplessness and haplessness that he conspired to project onto her.⁴⁷ He will attempt to make amends for this in *Letter to D*, his final epistolary act of expiation, a last setting straight of the record. Treason and atonement – these, then, are the bookends of Gorz’s life. But there is a third act of perfidiousness, or perhaps more exactly of *lese-majesty*, one which finds him in alignment with, and affirmative of, the disempowered, with those who have gone unrecognized and invisible. The word ‘betray’ has a double meaning – to be disloyal, but also to disclose, to signal what should remain unsaid, to reveal a hidden truth.

⁴³ Gorz confesses: “He would have liked to get rid of such a father (even at six he preferred the garage mechanic)” (1989: 90).

⁴⁴ See Gorz 1989: 89.

⁴⁵ Hence the title of Lodziak and Tatman’s (1997) chapter: ‘victim and accomplice’.

⁴⁶ This problematic – the internal colonization of the minds, the psyches, the self-perceptions of the colonized – is, of course, central to the work of Frantz Fanon. Fanon notes how the traumatic experience of racism involves being “overdetermined from without” leading to “Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea” and a wish to escape the gaze of others: “I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me” (1986: 116). The commonalities and differences between the Jewish experience of anti-Semitism (as discussed by Sartre) and the Black experience of racism is a central concern in *Black Skins, White Masks*.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Gorz 1989: 230.

VI *the heretical Heron*

“Traitors,” Gorz writes, “for this mad society, are quite simply those who recognize what it does not want to see: the unavoidable to which it is advancing, walking backwards” (1989: 149). Here we have, perhaps, another ‘backwards looking prophet’. But readers of Benjamin will see in this figure reversing step-by-step into the unseen future another character altogether – that of the historian and, above all, that of the ‘angel of history’. In Thesis IX of his ‘On the Concept of History’ from 1940, and with Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* as his inspiration, Benjamin famously writes:

This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm. (2003: 392)

The traitor here is the one who tells of a different past, who presents an alternative conception of history as trauma and catastrophe. The traitor betrays the lies and self-deceptions that mystify and mythologize what has been, justifying the present, celebrating the ‘now’ as the zenith of progress and civilisation. But this is, of course, a particular narration of events and occurrences, one fashioned by those who have proved victorious, those who held and hold power. It is but one story – there are others told by others, stories one rarely gets to hear, forbidden tales. These alternative pasts – the pasts of all those others subject to persecution, exploitation and extermination – exist only in traces, fragments, shards. Highly endangered in the present, they are themselves subject to oblivion, amnesia, and eradication. The traitor is true to these relics and remembrances, to what Benjamin terms “the tradition of the oppressed” (2003: 392). This “tradition of the oppressed” is, by its very nature, treasonable: it disturbs the ‘happy consciousness’ of the present just as it contains and reveals its bitter truth, its foundations in alienation and suffering. Traitor and tradition – these words have a common original in Latin: *tradere* – ‘to pass over’, ‘to give to another’. The traitor is one who *hands over* or *hands on*. Gorz is such a traitor, a traitor to a society and its history, to capitalism, which is itself a betrayal of the human, the idea of the human consigned to the

realm of utopian longings and dreams.⁴⁸ He is a traitor who bears, who reveals, who passes on the ‘tradition of the oppressed’. Half silenced, it is a tradition communicated only in whispers, mumblings, stutterings. His treason is that of the collaborator, that of the saboteur, whose critical strength lies only in cunning and improvisation, whose arsenal consists of “ruse, bluff and the capacity to take advantage of its own weakness” (Gorz 1989: 265).

Gorz takes sides: confessing and repudiating his shameful youthful choice of aligning with the powerful, he now embraces another, a critical treason. He chooses to be on side of “those who do not have enough and are not numerous enough to know they are a side”; of “those who would prefer not to possess, to isolate and to consume at the general expense, but to give, to communicate and to construct with and for all”; that is to say, on the side of those for whom, “this society has nothing to offer” (1989: 267).

Is this a ‘choice’ as such or a necessary, essential condition, a compulsion?⁴⁹ A ‘choice’ seems to suggest a particular privilege, one to which Gorz himself is not insensitive.⁵⁰ But it also means that Gorz is true to the origins of heresy: from *haeresis*, a Latin transliteration of the Greek meaning ‘choosing’, ‘choice of course’. Gorz’s treachery is a ‘thinking other’ bound up with his being other and being othered. He is a heretic; he is an intellectual:

Here I am then, almost where I started, but at least with certitude: the intellectual, if he cannot keep from being one, is objectively on the side of the revolutionary forces of historical negativity, and he must be on that side subjectively. This is the intellectual’s only chance of reality. (Gorz, 1989: 265).

The Heron is a heretic.

⁴⁸ “We are all potential traitors,” Gorz writes, “each of us petits bourgeois betrays this society in his dreams, scorns his fellows, denies in some nocturnal portion of himself, his daylight reality” (1989: 266).

⁴⁹ Certainly, Gorz insists that in making such a ‘choice’: “I have no possibility of changing sides” (1989: 265). He may be a traitor but he is no turncoat.

⁵⁰ Gorz writes: “he was neither Jew, Negro or Pole, a member of no nation or class, oppressed by no particular society, excluded from no community in which he might claim membership. The roles were assigned, there was none for him” (1989: 195) not even that, he adds later, of “pariah” (1989: 197). He continues with: “His situation resembled no other. He was not even persecuted and excluded by all communities and undertakings, for no one had bothered to exclude him, he had not even been granted a traitor’s reality” (189: 197).

VII *Sisyphus the scribe*

To side with and to redeem the tradition of the oppressed are acts, choices, predicated on the critical recognition that the past is not done and dusted, not fixed and finished, not something that exists independently of the act of reading and remembering it. The past is produced in and by the present moment. This notion of the openness of the past, of its inevitable and infinite incompleteness, is important for Gorz in *The Traitor* as a way of understanding both the task and outcome of writing. He seems to take Benjamin's claim in *One-Way Street* (1926) as axiomatic: "To great writers, finished works weigh lighter than those fragments on which they work throughout their lives. For only the more feeble and distracted take an inimitable pleasure in closure, feeling that their lives have thereby been given back to them" (Benjamin, 1996: 446). Similarly, what Gorz wants to express always seems to elude the page. He writes and this writing is, to be sure, productive – producing a semblance of a self – but it is also reductive – never doing justice in words to what truly matters: life and love, conviviality. And so although he writes, however much he writes, he comes no closer to some definitive statement, to a summation of what is to be said, to a final conclusion. *The Traitor* is not his first piece of writing – "the Essay" – but it is destined for the same fate. He reflects:

Once everything has been said, everything remains to be said. My first text, in which I had wanted to say everything, fell from my hands like a bundle of dead leaves. I thought that this was the fault of its conception. But now the second is falling from my hands in the same way. Everything still remains to say; everything always remains to be said. (Gorz 1989: 266)

And this will remain true of *all* his writing – these many subsequent pages, too, will fall like a veritable autumn of "dead leaves". And rightly so. Not because of any errors in "conception", but because of the very form of writing itself: the essay. The essay is an attempt, a try. Perhaps *The Traitor* has less of the essay and more of the *exposé* about it – an exposition exposing a nullity – but the sketch shares in that sense of the provisional and preliminary, in being a draft of, preparation for something more substantial: the perfection of the work of art. Writing as exercises in incompleteness and imperfection becomes, for Gorz, the labour of a lifetime:

I have learned that I shall never be through beginning again, that my world is this white paper, my life the activity of covering it. I once thought life would become possible when I had said everything; and now I realize that life, for me, is to write; to start out each time trying to say everything and to begin again immediately afterward because everything remains to be said. (1989: 266)

Writing is here the task of Sisyphus. And the reader of Benjamin will appreciate two moments of correspondence. Firstly, in an extended archaeological analogy in the *Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin compares the work of remembrance to the act of digging, of returning again and again to the same spot in order to probe ever further, to discover ever deeper layers. Such excavation proceeds, he insists, discontinuously, in “the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner” (1999: 611). And elsewhere, in his writings on Berthold Brecht’s ‘epic theatre’,⁵¹ Benjamin points precisely to the continual interruption of the events on stage, to the pauses that punctuate the action thereby forming tableaux, to the production of ‘situations’ and “quotable gestures” (2003: 305) that are momentarily frozen for inspection and recognition by the “relaxed audience” (2003: 302). These are critical instances of political didacticism. Indeed, such moments of the ‘dialectic at a standstill’ provide a model for Benjamin’s key historiographical concept, the ‘dialectical image’ in which a past moment – a fragment of the ‘tradition of the oppressed’ – is fleetingly illuminated, recognised and redeemed in the present, ripping it from the false continuum of history. To be on the side of the ‘others’, of the heretics, is to work in appreciation of, and in accord, with these discontinuities and disturbances. We will return to this.

One should be suspicious of prose that flows easily and serenely. Interruption, digression, disturbance, detours, circling and circumlocution, repetition – these give genuinely critical writing a stuttering, staccato rhythm and quality. “If the smoke from the tip of my cigarette and the ink from the nib of my pen flowed with equal ease, I would be in the Arcadia of my writing,” Benjamin jokes (1996: 463) though in truth, his real interest in arcades arises only when they are in ruins.

As for the ruins of the self, in the auto-archaeology undertaken by Gorz in *The Traitor*, his conception of writing is true to, and part of, the debris of broken things and words, the wreckage of the past and present that piles up ceaselessly before the angel of history. And for Gorz there is but one thing to do: turn over the page and start again.

Such writing without end, such a life devoted to endless writing, may be absurd – and Gorz is only too aware of this absurdity – but then that it perhaps as it should be. The absurd is itself a form of treason, a failure or refusal to accord, to accede, to agree to make sense: ‘absurd’, from the Latin *absurdus*: dissonant, incongruent, out-of-tune. If the sight of a heron dancing

⁵¹ See in particular Benjamin 2003: 304-305.

were not absurd enough, it seems likely that this one, *the Heron*, may also have preferred to keep purposely just a little out-of-step.

VIII *ars erotica*

In *Letter to D.*, Gorz recalls:

With *The Traitor*, the last thing I wanted was to ‘write a book’. I didn’t want to deliver the results of research but to write up the research itself, as it was actually being carried out, with its nascent discoveries, its misses, its wrong tracks, its groping elaboration of a method that never gets finalised. What I’d written interested me a lot less than what I might write next. I think this is true for any writer, published or otherwise” (2009: 67).

So, what is one to make of this unintended because extemporized (non-)book, a volume that appears less as the outcome, more as the by-product, of the necessary activity of writing? As should now be clear, it is not a work of ‘autobiography’ but perhaps its antithesis. Moreover, if Gorz is to be believed, it constitutes neither a work of art nor, when all is said and done, a work of philosophy. This (non-)book is like its author: more a case of what it *isn’t* than what it *is*. Then again, the reader should by now be on guard, suspicious at least, of the words of a self-confessed traitor. This figure is, after all, one of duplicity, of disguise and deceptive appearances. Gorz has proven himself particularly adept at (mis)leading his readers on a merry dance: this seemingly ordinary human being insists upon his own extraordinary nullity; he is Jewish, Catholic, Austrian, Swiss, bourgeois and nevertheless repudiates all of these identities;⁵² he is well-versed in aliases and alibis; he has the looks of a heron and yet the fleet footwork of a dancer. And books are treacherous, too – otherwise we *would* indeed be able to judge them by their covers. *The Traitor*, like its accidental author, dissembles: it seems to be autobiographical but there is more mortification than elucidation of the self; it draws on philosophy more for self-flagellation⁵³ than for introspective understanding; it could be a work of art but deems itself ill-fitted for such a claim.⁵⁴ Art? Philosophy? Gorz explicitly denies the one and implicitly denies the other. Or more precisely: just as Gorz

⁵² Gorz insists: “His particularity was his absence of particularity, his not belonging to the world of other people. Neither Jew nor German, nor Austrian, nor Swiss, nor French, nor refugee, nor friend, nor enemy, nor exploiter, nor exploited, he was nothing of all he had to define himself by” (1989: 197).

⁵³ “To write was for him what flagellation is for the mystic,” Gorz notes (1989: 203).

⁵⁴ He states: “I have not had the patience to create a work of art” (1989: 270).

twists and turns himself inside out in his writing, so *The Traitor* turns and sets art and philosophy about-face, back-to-front, puts them in a spin, sets them dancing. Let us consider such deft turnabouts and turnarounds.

Gorz's writings focus on the 'art' of work – the forms, patterns and practices of labour processes under capitalism. However, it is perhaps in his brief and belated reflections on '*the work of art*' that Gorz comes closest to Critical Theory and its articulation of, and insistence upon, an aesthetics of negation, negativity and non-identity. He writes:

Art is disidentifying; it contests the identity which society confers on the individual and which the latter overcomes by the mere fact that he employs given means of realization; art is negativity and reflexive *ascesis*, because in its essence it puts freedom at the source of human reality and thus restates the revolutionary requirement that man regain possession of himself (over and against his alienations) and continually re-create himself. (1989: 269)

In these terms, *The Traitor* might seem to constitute an exemplary instance of such an art, conceived as the very expression of alienation and the path to its overcoming. The book documents precisely such a struggle, such a painful process of confrontation and contestation between self and society, one which has led Gorz to where and to who he is now such that, looking back, he can (as best he can) find the words for it; such that he may lay his past bare, and with it himself, his present self. This may be *the work of art*, but it does not result in *an artwork*.

Let us pause here to consider some of the multiple meanings of that treacherous term 'the work of art': as a material or immaterial object (the artwork); as a practice of fashioning such a thing (the work involved in the making of art); as the work *of* the artwork, its impact and effects, its resonance; and, also perhaps as the use(s) of *artfulness* or craftiness, as cunning.

Gorz writes: "This book is in many respects the negation of art, a work of art which is trying to transcend itself at the very moment it comes into being, and which refuses to be an end in itself; that is why it is not a work of art" (1989: 270). *The Traitor* is *not* an *artwork* because it is not "an end in itself", indeed, it is not an end at all. Rather, it constitutes a documenting of the never-ending *labour* of artistic production, of the 'work of art' as ongoing productive practice. It is an artefact that arises through and in the very process of work, the work of writing the self into being, the work of *becoming* itself/oneself, a perpetual working-up of a text and a continual working-out of the self. It is an inexhaustible exposition of a *working on*

and *as* art. Art, the ‘work of art’ as enterprise is always an unfinished business. Gorz finds himself only and always in the midst of things, of texts, *in media res*.

The ‘work of art’ is thus configured here as imperfect in two senses: it not whole, it is always incomplete; and, as in the grammatical use of the term (the imperfect tense), it is something still occurring and ongoing, be it in the past or the present.

In its very imperfection *The Traitor* constitutes the epitome of the ‘work of art’ as a non-artwork. And the essay is its always imperfect form.

The Traitor is no artwork, then. Nor does it claim to be a work of philosophy. True, it is a work of ‘love for knowledge’ – it is born of a passion to know the self dispassionately. And yes, it begins not just steeped in, but explicitly in terms of, a kind of philosophical enquiry – as a Marxist-psychoanalytical-existential exploration and explication of subjectivity, of the self. The traitor longs to know the truth of himself, interrogates himself with all the torturing instruments of theory at his disposal. But Gorz is increasingly unconvinced by philosophy and philosophers, by their various abstractions and hypotheses, considering them as things remote from the concrete world of lived experienced and intervention.⁵⁵ As we have seen, his inspiration is ‘Morel’ and his foregrounding of *life*: “Out of all of this,” Gorz writes, “there remained the conviction that a living man is worth more than a dead philosopher” (1989: 236). And there are echoes, too, of Marx’s famous verdict on philosophers as mere interpreters of the world when he scornfully notes: “Philosophy remains today the substitute for action of impotent thinkers” (1989: 225).⁵⁶

No, *The Traitor* is only a very imperfect work of philosophy for it is not ‘love of knowledge’ that is most important, or rather this ‘love of knowledge’ is in and of itself insufficient. Some topsy-turvy thinking is need here, some playfulness. Philosophy, this ‘love of knowledge’ must be accompanied by the ‘knowledge of love’. Indeed, how can one claim to ‘love knowledge’ if one does not ‘know’ what *love* is? Philosophers, modern ones especially, have been better at the epistemic than the erotic. And here it is not so much philosophy as ‘love of knowledge’ that brings Gorz to a condition of self-actualisation / -creation / -realization, but rather knowledge of love, of his love for and with ‘Kay’ (Dorine). Self-realization

⁵⁵ Gorz is struck by Dorine’s comment: “that theory always runs the risk of blinding us to the shifting complexities of the real world” (2009: 58).

⁵⁶ In a footnote, Gorz comments: “there is no place, in a class society, for a philosophy that is both good and effective” (1989: 227).

(knowledge of self) and the realization of the self (overcoming alienation with the other) are the work of love, the ‘work of the art of love’, the artfulness of eros.

As an evocation of a life, of the awakening of love, of becoming human in and through love, *The Traitor* falls “somewhat short of and way beyond philosophy” (Gorz 2009: 35). It constitutes the start of, the prelude to, something else: an *ars erotica*. Like an invitation to dance.

And it concludes with an enigmatic phrase: “*En attendant mieux*” [awaiting the better] (1989: 272). It is a fitting and final gesture of incompleteness, affirmation of all the things that remain to be said. And the better – the best indeed – will duly be said, will arrive, before it is too late, delivered in the form of a letter, a *Letter to D*.

IX a letter: D.

D is for Doreen Kerr.

D is for Dorine (Gorz).

D is for dancer.

It begins with the living body, the loving and beloved body of D. – a body now smaller, lighter, a body grown old, grown frail, a body that has endured much pain. She is a dying body. They both know this. It is the body of the woman Gorz has loved for some sixty years. She is the body he is pressed against, holds gently, is held by, tenderly, as they dance together. She is the embodiment of love.⁵⁷

Letter to D bears the subtitle: “a love story.” What is one to make of this?

Gorz himself wryly observes that while it encompasses a “life-changing experience” (2009: 73) and that even then he/we knew “our union as the most important decision in both our lives” (2009: 72), such requited love did not make for much of a story at the time:

that story doesn’t inspire me to write about it, and neither do the seven years that, at the time I was writing *The Traitor*, had gone by since we made the decision to get married. Being passionately in love for the first time, being loved in return –

⁵⁷ “Lately,” Gorz writes on the penultimate page of his *Letter to D*, “I have fallen in love with you all over again. And I once more feel a gnawing emptiness inside that can only be filled when your body is pressed against mine” (2009: 105).

this was apparently too banal, too private, too common: it wasn't the kind of material that would allow me to rise to the universal. A love affair that's hit the rocks, that can never be – now that, on the other hand, makes for high literature. (2009: 72)

In finally setting pen to paper to tell this love story, Gorz looks thereby to correct two mistakes. Firstly, there is the paradox of something “too private, too common”, something that is shared but seemingly not to be shared. Perhaps there is indeed something of the universal here after all. Individual situations are not so individual (1989: 165). Such a love story is not simply that of two human beings, but rather a recognition of the critical work of love itself, of a politics of eros in a society of alienation, alienation understood precisely as estrangement from love. Gorz echoes Marcuse's vision of the radical role of the demands of eros of and for love in all its myriad forms, as the overcoming of alienated human life. Eros – as life, as playfulness and pleasure, as mutuality and conviviality, as sensitivity and sensuality, as affect and affection – these are antithetical to the instrumentalism, the fetishism, the pseudo-pleasures, the reification and stultification of human faculties, senses, qualities and experiences that are the hallmarks of the capitalist world. Such a love story is a discovering with an ‘other’ what it is to be human. It is to affirm, to embody, what our world denies. They may not be newsworthy, but it is worth reminding ourselves that love, lovers and love stories have almost always stood as indictments of power and inhumanity. Love “always spells danger for a totalitarian order” (Gorz, 1989: 284).⁵⁸

Secondly, this love story is written as a love letter – not an ‘essay’, not an ‘attempt’. There will be no need and no time to start again, for yet more writing – but rather only the work (the work of this work) of completion and conclusion. *Letter to D.* is a confession, a corrective. It is an account of, an accounting for, all the half-truths and treacheries which litter *The Traitor* and which disfigure their relationship – above all, which belittle ‘Kay’ (D., Dorine). It recounts a recounting, a restitution, a restoration. Written as the last few days run out, it is a redemption of the past, of life, of two lives lived together and of their shared love.

⁵⁸ As does dance for authoritarian theocratic regimes. As reported on the BBC website on 31st January 2023, the Iranian authorities sentenced a young couple (Astiazh Haqiqi, 21, and her fiancé Amir Mohammad Ahmadi, 22) to over ten years in prison between them for dancing together near Tehran's Azadi (Freedom) Tower. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-64470506> accessed 1/2/23.

Like *The Traitor*, *Letter to D.* involves the ongoing and enduring – a love that continues. But there is more: the writing of this letter is an activity (work), but it is also an act of making whole that which was deficient, a final act of finishing. In reconfiguring the narrative of *The Traitor*, in placing it in a new light, in setting the record straight, this love story serves to end the story. And this gives it a special quality. *Letter to D.* embodies the ‘work of art’ (as a practice) and it does so precisely to render complete what was only hitherto imperfect, to fashion thereby an *artwork*. It is a text of perfecting and perfection. Just as the traitor himself is transformed by love, so *The Traitor* is transfigured by this last love letter into a belated *artwork*.

There is another way of thinking with and through these two texts, this odd couple of essay and epistle, a perspective that returns us one last time to Benjamin. In his own last writings, ‘On the Concept of History’ he states: “The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up⁵⁹ at the moment of its recognisability, and is never seen again” (2003: 390). *Letter to D.* is perhaps less a final act of completion, the making of an artwork *by* an artwork, than this *moment of recognition* in which the truth – the truth of *The Traitor*, the truth of love – is fleetingly manifested and redeemed. It captures the true image of the (past) self, of past selves. *Letter to D.* is an instance of arrest, a split second in which the unceasing, ever-onward flow of life is frozen so that it can be preserved, saved, read. A present moment intervenes in the past to redeem it. In this ephemeral moment of conjuncture, of ‘dialectics at a standstill,’ the true image of past and present emerges and coalesces as a ‘dialectical image’. *Letter to D.* is precisely this moment of correspondence, of redemption. D is for dialectics – at a standstill, as an image.

All this returns us, finally, to the cover photograph, to André and Dorine dancing. For here we have the very image of the playful mutual self-realization that is the transcendence of alienation, that is love. It is a moment of truth whose truth – love – ensures that, irrespective of whether it qualifies as an artwork or not, it something even more precious: no, not an artwork; but a dialectical image. It is not the final image nor the last word – there is no last word, no conclusion, nothing conclusive. But it is, perhaps, the last chance, the last invitation to dance. And if so, then the only reply is: “*Oui*. Why not?”

⁵⁹ Benjamin’s metaphor here is a photographic one – the snapping of the shutter capturing and preserving the moment illuminated by the flash of the camera.

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