

Cerulean Snot:

Abjection as a

Posture of

Resistance

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1. There is nothing. There is nothing in this life. There is nothing, in this life at least, worth dying for. One must *construct* one’s justifications. Is it for the lack of a floor that I should fall to the ground? The quotidian parchment of the stand-in pronouns; the ‘one,’ in this case, or the ‘I,’ fails to parry the flaccid thrusts of the blunt dagger of lack. That is to say, even though I absent myself from my own narrative, I am still subject to its blows. Pronoun notwithstanding, I absorb the pain, the misery, the tactile depravity of being me and of being subject to being me.
2. **Alain Robbe-Grillet:** “Sick time, sick language, sick body, sick life, sick conscience...we must not, of course, see in these some vague allegory of original sin, or any other metaphysical lamentation. It is a question of everyday life and of direct experience of the world.”
3. The first of three aspects of abjection as a posture of resistance is this: wherever it comes from, this sense of “I” which each of us contains – allow me to rephrase for accuracy’s sake: this sense of “I” which contains each of

us, wherever it comes from and whether or not it is real, I mean to indicate its necessity. When Rimbaud writes: “For a long time I had boasted that I held every possible scene in my hands,” he is moving as and against this I-vessel which carries him through the gnashing chops of the sycophantic ocean of Being-in-the-world. The I-vessel’s periscope looks back onto itself. I advance masked. I assert myself by surrender.

4. **Martin Sorell, on Arthur Rimbaud:** “He goes on to say that the disordering of the senses involves all forms of love, suffering, and even madness. Metaphorical poisons have to be absorbed and distilled, the awful tortures of mind, soul, and body welcomed, if the goal, the unknown, is to be reached.”
5. Were it only possible that I is another.
6. What reason might I have for suicide? Death (or at least the threat of death) is the only background against which life seems real. The only access I have to my own death is suicide (or at least the threat of suicide). The same is true of writing. For a text to seem real, its death must provide its background, must always loom. Life’s meaning (I could just as easily say its possibility) is a product of the ever-presence of its negation. The terms of this contract is called by the name *abjection*.
7. **Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*:** “Abjection then wavers between the *fading away* of all meaning and all humanity, burnt as by the flames of a conflagration, and the *ecstasy* of an ego that, having lost its Other and its objects, reaches, at the precise moment of this suicide, the height of harmony with the promised land.”

8. **Michel Leiris, *Fourbis***: “If there is nothing in love – or taste – for which I am ready to face death, I am only stirring up empty space and everything cancels itself out, myself included.”
9. This image of “stirring up empty space,” is like stirring a soup with no ingredients in a non-existent pot. There is no ladle, no stirrer, no soup. Alas. What shall I eat? On what surface might I burn my tongue? What recourse do I have, if there is nothing to dribble down my chin?
10. **Italo Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience***: “Disease is a conviction, and I was born with that conviction.”
11. **Alain Robbe-Grillet on Italo Svevo**: “Something, all in all, like Grace.”
12. The abject should not be confused with misanthropy. The abject is a state of being, while misanthropy is more like a being of the State. That is, in misanthropy, one takes on the semblance of a unity with borders and a constitution; defining attributes against which others may be defined and recognized. Where the abject is permeable, allowing the silt of existence to seep into its pores, misanthropy is impenetrable, inside and outside are firmly established. The abject is democratic, misanthropy is despotic.
13. **Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror***: “For it is death that most violently represents the strange state in which a non-subject, a stray, having lost its non-objects, imagines nothingness through the ordeal of abjection. The death that ‘I’ am provokes horror, there is a choking sensation that does not separate inside from outside but draws them the one into the other, indefinitely.”

14. **Michel Leiris, *Manhood*:** “In November 1929, after various disappointments and disasters dating back to the spring before (consistently abortive attempts at love; scandalous drunkenness; almost bloody bites inflicted on my hands by a woman with whom I had once been in love; all-night debauchery after which, having been unable to achieve my purpose with a little American dancer, I appeared at a friend’s house around five in the morning and asked to borrow his razor with the – more or less sham – intention of castrating myself, a request my friend evaded by informing me that all he had was an electric razor), I realized that disease played a part in every one of these manifestations, and I decided to undergo psychoanalytic treatment...”

15. A peculiar affliction this *abjection*. Particular, or so it seems, to European men of the 19th and 20th centuries. Starting from Kristeva’s own list – and I doubt any of us would be here thinking ourselves through abjection had it not been for Kristeva: Dostoevsky, Lautremont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Celine. I add Leiris, Svevo and Rimbaud. Procreation is the ultimate cruelty: the production of creatures who never asked for life, but must eventually endure death.

16. **Michel Leiris, *Manhood*:** “One problem troubled his conscience and kept him from writing: is not what occurs in the domain of style valueless if it remains ‘aesthetic,’ anodyne, insignificant, if there is nothing in the fact of writing a work that is equivalent (and here supervenes one of the images closest to the author’s heart) to the bull’s keen horn, which alone – by reason of the physical danger it represents – affords the *torrero*’s art a human reality, prevents it from being no more than the vain grace of a ballerina?”

17. **Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Devils*:** “A big fire at night always produces an exciting and exhilarating effect; this explains the attraction of fireworks; but in the case of fireworks, the graceful and regular shape of the flames and the complete immunity from danger produce a light and playful effect comparable to the effect of a glass of champagne. A real fire is quite another matter: there the horror and a certain sense of personal danger, combined with the well-known exhilarating effect of a fire at night, produce in the spectator (not, of course, in one whose house has burnt down) a certain shock to the brain and, as it were, a challenge to his own destructive instincts, which, alas, lie buried in the soul of even the meekest and most domesticated official of the lowest grade. This grim sensation is almost always delightful. ‘I really don’t know if it is possible to watch a fire without some enjoyment.’”

18. The second of three aspects of abjection as a posture of resistance is this: Peek under the skirt of decorum, convention, manners, etiquette. In life, and in art also, a plethora of what I will call synchronizing structures: lines, curves, dashboards, interfaces, packages, covers, slipcases, bottles, cans, tins, displays, rhythms, plots, histories, traditions, languages, quotes: these are the surface attractors, the promises. Exterior forms replace interior contents. McLuhan, in all his over-quoted glory, hadn’t counted on this. Disease: repudiated?! An infection of health?

19. **Alain Robbe-Grillet on Italo Svevo:** “Zeno engages in a continual struggle to conquer ‘good health,’ regarded as the supreme good, which is simultaneously accompanied by an utter inner repose – harmony of spirit, goodness, purity, *innocence* – and by external manifestations of a more practical nature: elegance, coolness, cunning, success in business, the capacity to seduce women and to play the violin well – instead of drawing

from the latter instrument only horrible squeals, as from the rest of existence.”

20. In 1864, just five years after Darwin’s unveiling of evolutionary science, Dostoevsky wrote, in *Notes From The Underground*, “Once they prove to you, for instance, that you are descended from apes there’s no point frowning about it, you must accept it as fact.” (Dostoevsky, 15) But for the philosophically-minded Dostoevsky, this acceptance was not a capitulation to determinism. Dostoevsky’s “underground man” exercises his freedom – what one might call his *agency* – by embracing the very abjection which threatens to unmoor his sense of self. He proposes that a man such as himself, in order to assert his freedom,

21. **Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From The Underground*:** “...will even jeopardize his gingerbread and deliberately wish for the most ruinous rubbish, the most uneconomical nonsense, simply to print his own disastrous, fantastic element onto all this positive good sense. It is just his fantastic dreams, his abject foolishness that he wants to cling to, solely in order that he can convince himself (as if it were absolutely necessary) that people are still people and not piano-keys, on which the laws of nature themselves are playing with their own hands... “

22. **Michel Leiris, *Manhood*:** “On this scale, the personal problems with which *Manhood* is concerned are obviously insignificant: whatever might have been, in the best of cases, its strength and its sincerity, the poet's inner agony, weighed against the horrors of war, counts for no more than a toothache over which it would be graceless to groan; what is the use, in the world's excruciating uproar, of this faint moan over such narrowly limited and individual problems?”

23. The abject should not be confused with the tragic. The abject is a condition, while the tragic is a characteristic. If a thing is abject, it is afflicted and may yet be cured. If a thing is tragic, it will always be tragic and if, in time, it ceases to be tragic, then it ceases to be the thing that was tragic; it is a different thing, a non-tragic thing, while the original thing – no longer present, perhaps – remains tragic.
24. **Alain Robbe-Grillet on Italo Svevo:** “The infirmities by which Zeno is abruptly stricken (stiffness of the knee because a lame friend has told him about fifty-four muscles used in walking, or pain in the side because another has drawn him in a caricature with an umbrella sticking into him).”
25. **Susan Sontag on Michel Leiris:** “Instead of a history of his life, Leiris gives us a catalogue of its limitations. *Manhood* begins not with “I was born in...” but with a matter-of-fact description of the author’s body. We learn in the first pages of Leiris’s incipient baldness, of a chronic inflammation of the eyelids, of his meager sexual capacities, of his tendency to hunch his shoulders when sitting, and to scratch his anal region when alone, of a traumatic tonsillectomy undergone as a child, of an equally traumatic infection in his penis; and, subsequently, of his hypochondria, of his cowardice in all situations of the slightest danger, of his inability to speak any foreign language fluently, of his pitiful incompetence in physical sports. His character, too, is described under the aspect of limitation: Leiris presents it as ‘corroded’ with morbid and aggressive fantasies concerning the flesh in general and women in particular. *Manhood* is a manual of abjection – anecdotes and fantasies and verbal associations and dreams set down in the tones of a man, partly anesthetized, curiously fingering his own wounds.”

26. The abject should not be confused with tragedy. The abject can – I am very tempted to say must – have a sense of humor (probably black), while tragedy is forbidden to laugh at itself, lest it becomes comedy.

27. **Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season In Hell*:** “God! there are quite enough of our sort down here, the damned! I’ve been one of their number for far too long! I know them all. We always recognize one another; and we disgust one another. Charity is not in our vocabulary. But we are polite; our dealings with people are strictly by the book.”

28. The third of three aspects of abjection as a posture of resistance is this: the fetid stench of perdition never dissipates. You can’t just light a match. No amount of expiation can eradicate the odor of rot. Witness the flowers wilting in the vase and dying. Everything comes to this. *This*, of course, being abjection. The posture I’m suggesting is a slouch: infirmed, refusing medicines, ointments, crutches, canes, prosthesis. The posture I’m suggesting is a collapse in the middle of the busy street during the evening rush a week before Christmas; in the Chelsea Hotel, checked in under an assumed name; in the prime of life under the weight of waiting and waiting. I am suggesting an unwillingness to accept the inoculation, an acceptance of this sickness. *This sickness*, of course, being life. Cerulean snot smeared gleefully on the sleeves of our dressing gowns.

29. **Alain Robbe-Grillet on Italo Svevo:** “At the end, [Zeno] discovers that his analysis is capable of converting health into disease; that need be no obstacle: he then decides that he must treat his health. This health that he wants to attend to – this bad health – this *conscience*, as the

Italian title of the book indicates, Zeno ends by calling simply 'life,' which 'unlike other diseases, is always fatal.'"