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Cold World

The Aesthetics of Dejection
and the Politics
of Militant Dysphoria

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something beyond him:

Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;
To her may all things live, from Pole to Pole,
Their life the eddying of her living soul!
O simple spirit, guided from above,
Dear Lady! Friend devoutest of my choice,
Thus may'st thou ever, evermore rejoice.

A Sermon In The Name Of Death

Something must have happened to the militant, to separate him or her from the satisfactions of everyday life. Even in situations where the conditions of everyday life are not in the least satisfactory, where harsh suffering and gnawing anguish are the order of the day, the militant is a person set apart. We will not understand her if we suppose her to be purely a creature of anger and bitterness: what distinguishes her is not the intensity of her outrage, but the fact of her separation. She is someone who has decisively rejected every source of consolation: every hope that tomorrow will of its own accord come bearing some respite, some unanticipated good news.

The militant does not live in the same world as everyone else. Even the communist fighter who vigorously upholds the maxim that all are equal, who tirelessly hurls herself across the boundaries of class and communal identity in order to be in equality with others, affirms through these very transgressions her extrication from the world in which those others themselves live. Theirs is a world of inequalities, a world ineluctably structured by distinctions both gross and fine between persons: a world in which the firebrand with a passion for equality will always appear as a curious interloper, a person from *outside*.

Something must have happened, or have failed to happen. There may have been no single disaster, no totally devastating betrayal of trust in the world. The militant may even have the mildest of personal backgrounds: she is not infrequently in fact a child of privilege, of loving and educated parents who may have imagined that their offspring would be destined for a life of quiet professional accomplishment. Even the most charmed existence is not

without its disappointments, but these are seldom sufficient in themselves to make the whole of life seem accursed. It is not merely a question of *overreacting*, of failing to understand the true scale of human misfortune and hence to recognise the relative triviality of one's own upsets. There is no common measure, whether just or inflated, that can connect the world of the militant with the world she has forsaken.

For the adolescent in revolt, a militant in prototype, the world is a model for two contradictory sets of axioms: the axioms of *life* and those of (a) *truth*. The problem this contradiction presents is not immediately personal in character, although personal problems inevitably figure in its elaboration. It has the appearance of a cosmic struggle, a battle for the soul of the world. Conventional wisdom tells us that this is self-aggrandisement, a consequence of taking one's inner turmoil too seriously and projecting one's private libidinal difficulties onto a metaphysical canvas. Adolescents have - or like to think they have - souls; the world has none. But this verdict presupposes that the outcome of the struggle is already decided: that life itself is all there is to life, and that there is no place at all in the "real" world for truth. The adolescent reopens the question; the militant pursues a solution.

What are the axioms of life? They are those which are verified by existing society, the society administered by one's parents and teachers and inhabited by one's peers and siblings. These are, firstly, that life is *unfair*: that existence is a struggle, at every level, between unequally matched forces; that there are winners and losers; that the prizes to be won are status and material wealth, and the forfeits deprivation and bitter humiliation. Secondly, that life *goes on*: that there is an everlasting continuity between life as it is now and, *mutatis mutandis*, life as it has always been; that life will at best ignore and at worst contemptuously obliterate any

attempt to live otherwise than in the self-interested service of a limited set of goods. Life "goes on" because it is essentially homeostatic, a self-sustaining and self-correcting order. It is not building inexorably towards a moment of ultimate crisis when its contradictions will shake it to pieces. None of life's little disasters - or even its appalling, exorbitant horrors - has ever managed to put a stop to all of this. Maybe one day, an asteroid; but it won't come with a hammer and sickle painted on the side.

The axioms of life are those of a nihilism; they govern a life without values, without any end or purpose save its own continuation. This may seem counter-intuitive: isn't it the nihilist who fails to value life, to recognise the sanctity and dignity of living beings? What other values can there be besides those which flow from life itself, the values of the living? But this self-valuation of the living present encloses a void, a total absence of regard for anything besides itself, which is why the teenage daughter who accuses her mother - who never does anything that is not for the good of the family - of "selfishness" has a certain terrible justice on her side. Truly to value something is to value it "more than life itself", more than that which blindly survives in one's own life.

Accordingly, it is very clear why adolescent revolt so often involves of a turn towards the symbolism of death: such symbols mark the exits from the convivial homeostasis of existing society, and serve as portals to the land of the dead.

The video for Britney Spears's 2005 single "Everytime" depicts the troubled pop star at the end of her tether: hounded by paparazzi, rowing violently with a male partner, and eventually lying in a bath submerging her head beneath the milky bathwater. An angelic doppelgänger-Britney then observes herself being pulled from the bath by

the same partner and subjected to a failed resuscitation attempt in hospital, before passing along to the next room where a woman is cradling her newborn child. This juxtaposition of images of death and new life is apparently part of a fantasy sequence in the mind of the original Britney-in-the-bath, whom we finally see lifting her head back out of the water with a reassuring smile: she has chosen to live after all.

The officially released video presents a somewhat toned-down version of a concept that originally played much more explicitly with the theme of suicide, hinting strongly at an overdose. Following criticism of the original video from various quarters, Britney's label felt compelled to issue a statement clarifying that the singer did not "endorse [suicide] as a *solution* to any individual". The wording is significant: a famous US court case of the 1980s was brought against the heavy metal singer Ozzy Osbourne by the parents of John McCollum, a teenager who had killed himself with a shotgun allegedly whilst listening to Osbourne's "Suicide Solution".

The lyrics of "Suicide Solution" are in fact concerned with alcohol addiction, and were written by Osbourne's bandmate Bob Daisley, in the aftermath of AC/DC singer Bon Scott's alcohol-related death from hypothermia, with the intention of warning Ozzy that he too was dissolving his life in drink. Nevertheless, in court it was argued that the song not only endorsed suicide as a solution to life's problems, but also contained irresistibly persuasive subliminal messages urging the listener to "Get the gun and try it! Shoot, Shoot, Shoot". The case fed into an ongoing moral panic among US Christians about heavy metal's satanic influence; it is much the same constituency, one imagines, that needed to be reassured that the once-wholesome Britney Spears was not also peddling a deadly "suicide solution", a toxic reagent by which the souls of the nation's teenagers would be fatally

corroded.

Even in its bowdlerised form, the "Everytime" video presents a moment of existential indecision, a fugue of suicidal ideation in which the singer fantasises about her own death. A fan-generated clip on the video-sharing website YouTube pairs these images with the music of Xasthur, a one-man "black metal" band from Alhambra, California. In the clip, Britney's head disappears beneath the surface of the bathwater to the accompaniment of a churning miasma of distorted minor arpeggios, mechanically pounding drums, off-key synths and distant, howling vocals. This appalling sonic aura, the pairing implies, is the true sound of Britney's inner emotional chaos. The music thus restores the lost "suicidal" content to the video, sound-tracking its implicit narrative. The clip nominates the voided, unearthly screams of Malefic (the pseudonym of Scott Conner, Xasthur's creator) as the phantom complement of Britney's saccharine, robotised vocals.

Suicide is a recurring theme in Xasthur's music; but it is suicide viewed not as a "solution", a resolution of life's problems, but as capitulation, the obedient response to a deadly interpellation. The dissonant sound-world of Malefic's compositions is designed to confront the listener with the waste and horror of human existence, the worthlessness of all human striving: the affect it aims to induce is one of overwhelming despair. The listener who endures this "arcane and misanthropic projection" of unsparing negativity and is not moved to self-harm will thereby have demonstrated a certain resilience, albeit the resilience of self-delusion. For in spite of the opposition of authentic inner "strength" to corrupt, worldly "weakness" that often characterises depressive black metal artists' statements of intent, it is not inner resolve that protects the listener from despair but a failure of rational consistency. The purpose of

Xasthur's music is to hold up a musical mirror to the world, revealing life as a hopeless situation in which suicide is the only *logical* course of action.

It is a distorting mirror, and the suicidal logic of the world it reflects is a distorted logic: that of depressive thinking, a supremely logical mode of thought. Depressive thinking is driven not by affect but by its own detached automatism. It is neither a reflection on, nor an obsession with, the thinker's own sadness, which is on the contrary invisible to it (the realization that one is in fact grief-stricken or unbearably sad is often the first emotional touchstone of a person emerging from depression). At its centre is a simple identification: life and death are identical, the axioms of life are axioms of death. There is no *difference* between being alive and being dead, except that the living suffer.

Depressive thinking is simultaneously intensely lucid and intensely blinkered: ruthlessly and brilliantly reductive, it is able to demolish any consoling counter-argument by referring it immediately to the ground zero of its own ordinary devastation. It is monotonous in the same way that Xasthur's music is monotonous, endlessly circling around the same motifs. The world it composes is one in which the light of the world has gone out, and every being formerly illuminated by that light now stands with every other in a common obscurity. The cover of Xasthur's *Defective Epitaph* accordingly depicts an array of tombstones, each inscribed with an identical barcode (for the number zero): an image of the land of the dead, in which living itself appears as an absurd and insupportable excrement.

If Xasthur's music shows us what is in the mirror of depression – our own distorted figures, minimally distinguished from the abysses that surrounds and will soon engulf them – it also however shows us the mirror itself, thereby enabling us to see what depressive thinking itself consis-

tently screens out: the facticity of its own logic, of the banally compulsive ideation that supports the consistency of its twilight world. By giving form to this compulsion, it both attracts its listeners to it, drawing them into its ambit, and estranges them from it, enabling them to place it at a distance. Xasthur's image of despair is even a little bit silly: the photograph of Malefic's home studio that appears on the inner sleeve of *Defective Epitaph* shows two B. C. Rich guitars propped up by the far wall, their stylised devil-horned bodies a reminder of the cartoonish pomp with which heavy metal has traditionally paid its respects to the powers of darkness. Even the bar-coded tombstones on the cover are bleakly funny in their own way.

While Xasthur's music may be conceived as a kind of psychic assault, an attempt to disorientate and demoralise the listener, it is also strangely tranquil, almost comforting, in its sonic texture. The blast-beats on the drums are muted so that what would have been a pummelling assault up-close becomes part of the throb and churn of the guitar arrangements, which in turn are based around ringing arpeggios and chord progressions or single-note lines sustained through rapid "tremolo" picking. The effect of the latter is to mask the distinction between attack, sustain and decay in the articulation of each note or chord: the sound is closer to that of a bowed instrument played tremolo-style. In general, then, the percussive elements of the music are subordinated to texture, to the creation of a continuous yet palpitating tone.

Xasthur's musical antecedents here are the Norwegian black metal bands of the early 1990s, such as Burzum and Darkthrone, whose combination of speed-picked guitar lines and frenetic blast-beat drumming evoked the furious urgency of the "wild flight" of the Norse Oskari, horsemen of the sky. The hypnotic aspects of this style are coupled

with the thrill of the chase, of being swept up insensibly into a wild and violent multitude: the intensity of the sound is a hectic intensity, an intensity of movement. With Xasthur, the same musical elements and techniques are dedicated to the establishment of a static, immobilised sound-image, a downwards spiral: the hypnotic aspect of the original sound is foregrounded, while the adrenaline-driven rage of early black metal is channelled into cryptic, tormented howling.

Warlike and insurrectionary, the Norwegian bands who declared that "black metal *ist Krieg*" sought to rouse their followers from what they saw as the apathy of a Christianised, egalitarian society, recalling them to the natural aristocracy of their pagan national roots. Some manifestations of this ideology were more overtly fascist than others; and some, such as that propounded by Burzum's Varg Vikernes, were so *ultra*-fascist that even those attracted by the politics of the extreme right wing were apt to be alienated by the concerted loathing of humanity they evinced. But the political attitudes of the progenitors of black metal were generally expressions of a drive to develop an ideology maximally incompatible with the peaceful social democratic self-image of Norwegian society: they were less about allegiance to nationalist causes than they were about generating antagonism.

The original Norwegian black metal scene was a brief explosion of anti-social outrage, marked by an escalation of criminality (from graveyard desecration to church-burning and murder) and terminated by internecine conflict (the infamous killing of Mayhem's Euronymous by Varg Vikernes). Much of the subsequent history of the genre has been characterised by a morbid reverence for the mythologised time in which these original events unfolded, a fascination with its malevolent *dramatis personae* and their horrifying excesses. It is thus possible to speak of a "late", or

"belated", black metal, a music in which the fantasy of a violently anti-heroic "dream-time" plays a significant role. The shift, in Xasthur and other "late" black metal bands, from warlike belligerence to depressive introspection may be understood as a reaction to precisely this belatedness.

It is significant that a common term of approbation in black metal circles is "true" (as in "true Norwegian black metal"). The early years of the genre were stimulated by a vigorous tape-trading scene, in which third- or fourth-generation copies of already low-quality recordings were circulated between devotees. Darkthrone's seminal "Transylvanian Hunger" was recorded with such a raw, hissy, compressed sound that a first-generation copy might easily have been mistaken for a live performance captured by a fan waving a Dictaphone. This cadaverous "necro" sound, degraded and degenerate, was originally an artefact of the limited means of production and distribution available to black metal musicians (Varg Vikernes's recordings as Burzum were largely funded by his mother). Almost from the beginning, however, it was established as a token of authenticity, a sign that the artist had sincerely broken away from what was regarded as a sterile and commercialised mainstream metal scene. Accordingly, low (or deliberately lowered) production values and primitive (by contemporary standards) recording techniques are one of the ways in which a black metal artist can demonstrate fidelity to the genre's roots.

"Late" black metal artists such as Xasthur and Striborg takes this sonic degradation a step further, emphasising the dissonant, eerie elements within the original template. Striborg's Sin Nanna reduces the guttural vocal rasp of black metal vocals from a menacing growl to a squawking death-rattle, the sound of some gnarled woodland spirit expectorating apoplectically in the darkness, while unmaritaling the

taut rumble of Darkthrone's blast beats into a chaotic clatter of freeform drumming. The aura the music diffuses is one of confused, asphyxiating dread, like an attack of sleep paralysis (or the experience, common among those who believe they have been abducted by supernatural beings, of waking in the darkness and finding oneself immobilized and invaded by a hostile presence). Xasthur, meanwhile, builds on the atonal riffing of Burzum and the disfigured counterpoint of Manes and Mutilation to construct a sound-world in which consonance is continually menaced by intrusions from another harmonic universe. Guitars and synths are deliberately detuned so that complex multi-tracked arrangements curdle and pulse with malign energy. If the hypnotic, tranquilising texture of the music suggests a return to the womb, the "disharmonic convergence" of Xasthur's compositional approach evokes a fouled and toxic antenatal environment.

The introversion (literally, "turning inwards") of late black metal must be understood as a development of the genre's original combative, anti-social stance. Malefic's withering scorn for Californian metal sceneries is extended, in Xasthur's "Defective Epitaph", to the Californian ideology of New Age-y social progressiveness in general. The track titles include spiteful inversions and negations of New Age nostrums: "Legacy of human irrelevance", "Worship (the war against) Yourself", "Unblessed be". But to wage war on oneself, and especially to *worship* the forces which war within and against the self, is to uphold an ethic of inner conflict and self-overcoming (*not* self-realisation) which is by no means simply nihilistic. What is more, this ethic not only mirrors but intensifies the early Norwegian black metallers' ferocious attack on what they saw as the complacent mediocrity of a society dominated by liberal Judeo-Christian moral values.

For the sect who gathered around Euronymous's retail

outlet *Helvete*, anointing themselves black metal's "inner circle" and scheming to bring down their society by snarling at it, the temptation was always to regard themselves as an elect few, as superior beings dedicated to a true individualism in defiance of universal social conformity. Metal has always been anti-conformist, but it is also by and large anti-sectarian: a broad church, welcoming all persuasions. That is precisely why black metal had to separate itself from "commercial" metal, turning to a fundamentalist misprision of the satanic and megalomaniac tropes of the genre to legitimate its rejection of all those "posers" who betrayed their lack of sincerity by compromising with the established moral order. Unfortunately even Venom and Bathory, among the most artistically compelling of black metal's influences, were in reality less than wholly serious in their dedication to outrage and insurrection. Ultimately the only way to validate the "true" black metal was to make the transition from aesthetic iconoclasm to active criminal violence – from performing menacing stage acts with impaled pigs' heads and upside-down crosses to burning churches and ruthlessly murdering one's rivals.

In making this transition, black metal rapidly exhausted its capacity for real mayhem: the police cracked down, the most careless offenders received lengthy jail sentences, and most of the musicians reverted to corpse-painted theatrics: sociopathic individualism became once again a *spiritual* position. "Late" black metal is thus the inheritor of a re-aestheticising of a radically anti-aesthetic moment, a moment when the criterion for judging the validity of a piece of music was no longer its sensuous qualities or its cultural significance but rather the extent to which its creators' declarations of intent coincided with real acts of rebellion and destruction. As Ulrike Meinhof had said, in quite another context: other left-wing groups had merely theorised about

revolutionary action; the RAF had actually gone out and *done* it. One should not overlook the role of the media in establishing this correlation between proclamation and deed, phantasmatically converting the former into the latter until *Greven* ("Count Grishnakh", a pseudonym of Varg Vikernes) became precisely the figure of supernatural evil his creator had always wanted him to be. (Indeed, this is true of the RAF as well).

While Xasthur's music inhabits the re-spiritualised, re-aestheticised terrain of belated black metal, and in no way seeks to re-ignite the paroxysm of violence that shook Norwegian society in the early 1990s, it also radicalises the misanthropy of early black metal, annulling the sectarian elitism of the "inner circle" by pronouncing a judgement of irrelevance on all human endeavour. Here we must ask: is a consistent and thorough-going hatred of *all* humanity possible? Indifference towards humanity is not difficult to imagine: pretty much all of the universe is full of it pretty much all of the time. But *hatred* of humanity as such, of "the human precisely as human", is much more difficult to carry off.

Hatred is a human emotion; this means both that it is a general propensity of human beings and that it manifests itself distinctly in specific human individuals or collectivities, and is thus inexorably situated and partial. That is the first problem: the affect of hatred must always be borne by some human being. It cannot therefore be consistently both a) contempt for that which is inferior to oneself, and b) universal in scope, since a human being, included in its own hatred of all things human, cannot be inferior to itself.

The misanthropist must choose between two paths. The first is to make an exception for some special class of human being, and to include oneself in the exception. A few human beings are strong, pure, decent and worthy of survival. Even

though the very essence of humanity is accursed, it is possible to live an aesthetically pleasing life. The conditions of such a life will include isolation from the "great masses" of humanity (concentrated as they are in the cities), emotional coldness and repression, and devotion to an external rule that will give coherence and meaning to one's actions. Thus, *mutatis mutandis*, H. P. Lovecraft's approbation for "Puritan inhibitions" as "attempts to make of life a work of art - to fashion a pattern of beauty in the hog-wallow that is animal existence", and the post-apocalyptic rural paganism dreamed of by Varg Vikernes.

The first path alternates with the second, according to which all of humanity remains accursed but is hated *from the standpoint of the inhuman* - in the first instance, of the dead. "Pure Depressive Black Funeral Doom Metal" exponent Nortt describes his music thus:

The elegies of Nortt tell about death and darkness viewed from the dying and from the dead. They reveal a bitter hate towards life and its divine maker. It is pure misanthropy and blasphemy - not self-pity! The darkened soil is praised as the godforsaken heaven - a heaven in hell. In order to unchain oneself from the despair of life, follow the path of death! At a funeral pace and with a sombre, chanting voice, Nortt summons the forces in the night.

"Pure misanthropy...not self-pity": in order to be pure, misanthropy must be purified of any attachment to the human self that would fall within its remit. The allegiance of the misanthropist without reserve is to a world of the dead that despises and rejects that of the living. Xasthur's "Telepathic with the Deceased" engages the same conceit: "Haters of life are telepathic with the deceased. / Fragments of failure, some said it was art, for it only bears a meaning

The Brain of Ulrike Meinhof

when all life is torn apart". We might call this affect tele-antipathy: the "spooky action at a distance" of "the dying and...the dead". It is unsurprising that a recurring theme in Xasthur's lyrics and song titles is that of *projection*. Total misanthropy forces a split in the human self: a self-projection into the realm of the inhuman, which is indiscernible from a projection from that realm into the human world.

The cold world of black metal is a deliberate freezing of the world, fixing it within a terminal image, in order that its frost-bitten surface may be shattered by anonymous, inhuman forces rising from the depths of the self. It is a withdrawal of affect from the world, in order to experience "the eerie bliss and torture of solitude" and so discover the forces at war within oneself. These operations must be understood as spiritual exercises, as forms of emotional fasting intended to release the soul from its worldly attachments. Such exercises are purely narcissistic and self-saving if they do not also release the soul for new worldly commitments. The vertiginous dysphoria of Xasthur's sound-world is not yet the focused displeasure of the militant, but a simulacrum – a spiritualisation – of malcontent. It embodies a will that that which is should not be, but not a will that that which is should be otherwise.

Das Konzept Stadtguerrilla der Roten Armee Fraktion basiert nicht auf einer optimistischen Einschätzung der Situation in der Bundesrepublik und Westberlin.

The RAF's urban guerrilla concept is not based on an optimistic overview of the situation in the Federal Republic and West Berlin.

We do not presume to know the mind of Ulrike Meinhof, and what follows is not to be a séance.

It has been the fate of Meinhof's name to be yoked to that of Andreas Baader, and so to be invoked as a byword for revolutionary desperation. Everyone knows that "the Baader-Meinhof gang" committed a number of outrages: bombings, kidnappings, bank robberies; the occasional perforation of bystanders. It is also well known that Meinhof died in confinement, officially of suicide. The conditions of that confinement, and the torment of isolation she was made to endure, somewhat confuse the matter of whether her death was self-inflicted or brought about by the authorities.

After she died, the brain of Ulrike Meinhof was removed and preserved in formaldehyde, in order that it might be studied for abnormalities. It is imaginable that a long period of solitary confinement in the "dead wing" of a maximum-security prison might inflict some neurological attrition. But the question put to the brain of Ulrike Meinhof was rather this: what is it that causes a young woman journalist from a middle-class background to renounce the privileges society has afforded her, join an armed unit of self-styled "urban guerrillas", and commence to wage a ferocious war against the powers of the state? Nobody of sound mind could