

APOLOGY FOR QUIETISM

A Sotto Voce Symposium
Part 3

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Introduction: The Promise of Apathy

“When offered a choice between two politically intolerable alternatives,” according to Alasdair MacIntyre,

it is important to choose neither. And when that choice is presented in rival arguments and debates that exclude from public consideration any other set of possibilities, it becomes a duty to withdraw from those arguments and debates, so as to resist the imposition of this false choice by those who have arrogated to themselves the power of framing the alternatives.¹

“Duty,” when applied to withdrawal, is a refreshing word to find in the context of citizenship. Refusal to choose sides in “rival arguments and debates,” or to choose between rival candidates for political office, is taken generally as a symptom of apathy or, if widespread, of anomie. The fear of apathy is endemic to republican

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, as quoted in Constantine Sandis, “Torn Away from Sureness,” *TLS*, August 15, 2008, 23.

politics and manifests itself in the manufacture of pressing choices. Apathy about making choices is regarded as an invitation to servitude.

In such politics, the idea of an alternative to alternatives is raised only in fiction. J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, published last year, names the alternative to alternatives "quietism." Señor C, the diarist, offers assurance that our "alternatives are not placid servitude on the one hand and revolt against servitude on the other." For there is always, Señor C reflects,

a third way, chosen by thousands and millions of people every day. It is the way of quietism, of willed obscurity, of inner emigration. . . . René Girard's fable of the warring twins is pertinent: the fewer the substantive differences between the two parties, the more bitter their mutual hatred. . . . If I were pressed to give my brand of political thought a label, I would call it pessimistic anarchistic quietism, or anarchist quietistic pessimism, or pessimistic quietistic anarchism: anarchism because experience tells me that what is wrong with politics is power itself; quietism because I have my doubts about the will to set about changing the world, a will infected with the drive to power; and pessimism because I am sceptical that, in a fundamental way, things can be changed.²

Quietism does not need to be pessimistic and is more commonly anarchic, I think, than "anarchistic." *Ulysses* is as skeptical a book as Coetzee's *Diary* and as averse to either/ors, but Joyce seems optimistic—though perhaps willfully. "Yes" is his book's last word, even if "will" is its penultimate.

Joyce at any rate equips his book with exits from its doorless chambers. As Richard Ellmann explains (in an essay called "A Cheese Sandwich"), "an existential choice" faces Mr. Bloom and he manages to duck it over lunch:

Bloom enters the restaurant, only to be rudely jarred by the sight of men crowding the counter, "wolfing gobfuls of sloppy food," spitting halfmasticated gristle back on to the plate. . . . Bloom cannot bear it. He says in loathing, "Eat or be eaten. Kill! Kill!" This is Bloom's dark night of the body. For a moment he considers vegetarianism as a better recourse, but the thought of stinking garlic puts him off. . . . [Then] he hits on [an even] better choice, a Gorgonzola sandwich. The cheese . . . is neither vegetable nor meat: it is formed from mammal's milk without slaughter, and enclosed in bread which is vegetable in origin but reconstructed by man.³

"Temperate" is Ellmann's word for Bloom's selection; Señor C might call it "quietist." On an island racked by bad alternatives, Bloom's choice is a model of avoidance—an artful dodging of ideological alternatives, each equally intoler-

2. J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2008), 12–13, 203.

3. Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 77–78.

able. Bloom “finds,” as Ellmann puts it, “a surprising union in what would seem two quite different persuasions, that of the missionary and that of the cannibal: they share a relish for blood.”⁴ Carnivores and vegetarians alike, Bloom imagines, crave a juiciness and sweetness that sharp blue cheese does not supply. Taking refuge from religion and politics in less punishing disciplines, gastronomy and anthropology among them, Bloom relishes his anomic cheese. . . .

Around the time that I was carried piggyback to a political convention in California—this was 1960 and I was wearing a Stevenson button—“Better Dead Than Red” and “Better Red Than Dead” were slogans heard locally. I was unqualified, being still in elementary school, to reject or discount any slogan. I came to political consciousness as the New Left proffered “third way” alternatives; and though I agreed that Ways 1 and 2 differed trivially from each other, it did not seem that pacifism and anarchism were real alternatives to them. The *bien-pensants* with whom I ate my bag lunches did not share my sense that pacifism was a variety of activism, thus not so different from the -isms it opposed. A thirst for commitment, engagement, and regular meetings characterizes any kind of activism. The meetings enable activists to speak “up” and “out” with each other. I thought that anarchism looked different and perhaps interesting, until I discovered how much speaking up and planning anarchy required.

Furthermore, from Left to Right everyone shared a love of freedom. Every -ist or -crat wanted to be free of something, and each believed eternal vigilance would be freedom’s price. Eventually it came to me that vigilance, not freedom, was what such people wanted: freedom from vigilance was not a liberty they craved. Quentin Skinner has traced these themes in the tradition of republican thought:

Sallust had expressed the . . . anxiety that, so long as servility can be enjoyed with ease, people may come to prefer it to the more strenuous life of civic engagement. . . . For Milton, as for so many later writers in the republican tradition, the price of freedom is nothing less than eternal vigilance.⁵

“Better Dead Than Red” and “Better Red Than Dead” came back to me like pop lyrics as I read those sentences, and I found myself wondering why “Better Dead, *period*” had never graced a bumper sticker. Better dead, in other words, than to live the “strenuous life of civic engagement,” in which the choices one is pressed to make seem retrospectively almost trivial. Americans (including Admiral McCain’s son) are welcome visitors today in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

4. Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey*, 75.

5. Quentin Skinner, “What Does It Mean to Be a Free Person?” *London Review of Books*, May 22, 2008, 17.

There are less vigilant ways to live—“inner emigration,” as Señor C describes them—but they are regarded as shameful. Francis Picabia, in *Unique Eunuque* (the title assures us that he knew how shaming mechanisms work), wrote that he moved to New York rather than take up arms against Germany in 1914, because he wanted to get as far from away from Germans as he could. The Germans and their enemies were tied up in a relationship, however negative, whereas Picabia wanted no relationship with the Germans at all. This attitude of Picabia’s—that “every conviction is an illness” to be fled—is not self-contradictory or self-refuting. Quietism is not itself a “conviction,” because *quietism* and *quiet* stand in a different relationship than other -isms and their pertinent adjectives do. Whereas it appeared to me, in my teens, that the anarchists were not anarchic and the pacifists pacific by no means, the quietists were and still are pretty quiet. I do not mean that quietists never make a sound or write for publication. Silence too, if total, is the commitment of an activist: retiring from the world requires a decision and much talk in advance; an oath of silence, such as Trappists take, results from overwhelming conviction and is made before witnesses in a verbal, indeed oral act. Mostly, one hears quietists sighing, as a way to signify disquiet about others’ fidgeting.

Cowardice can be defended bravely without self-refutation, because the opposite of cowardice is not courage but bravado. A scholar doing scholarship can teach quietism quietly. An example is *Reading Judas*, a reevaluation of the bad apostle, by Elaine Pagels and Karen King.⁶ As reviewers have not failed to notice, Pagels and King’s normative aim is to show how some early Christians thought that the apostles (and the bishops who succeeded them) were reckless and un-Christian in encouraging martyrdom and in making the church’s central rite a celebration of it. Eventually, the antimartyrs were silenced by accusations of cowardice and inadequate zeal. The perfect Christian life, though, as described in the Sermon on the Mount, is not a life of zeal, or even of choice and action: for God “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. . . . Take no thought for your life,” Jesus urges his listeners,

what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (Matt. 5:45; 6:25, 28–29)

It is difficult to imagine a finer description of indolence or apathy. For apathy is not acedia or ennui. We think of ennui, acedia, and apathy as of a kind, then

6. Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2008).

assume that they are symptoms or, in themselves, diseases. But what the Sermon on the Mount evokes is ease, not *disease*. Jesus hallows apathy—or, let us say, the doubt that we should “take thought” for matters beyond our ken—and he blesses the ease and quietude that follow naturally on such doubt. He would have us be like flowers, rather than like kings, who, for all their glory, must “take thought,” “toil,” and “spin.”

The organic metaphors that we apply to cultures—which are not life forms, we should bear in mind, but more like games or machines—are figures misappropriated long ago from the green world. But our knowledge that “organic culture” is a figure of speech has not hindered its growth into a hard problem. We respond to the wearing down or wearing out of our faux-organic machines and games as if these were real organic failures. “Culture death,” Charles Taylor terms one such failure—the inertial end of the Crow Nation—in a review of Jonathan Lear’s book *Radical Hope*.⁷ I take it that what Lear means by *radical* hope is the extreme opposite of *acedia*, which set in when the Crow were confined to a reservation in the late nineteenth century.⁸ But agreeing to “hope” as a name for this affect or experience requires our accepting that any sort of conceptual or cultural organization—any faux-organic game or machine—is superior to the inertial form of life that the Sermon on the Mount extols. The nomadic warrior life of the Crow collapsed “when the buffalo went away.” For “after this,” the Crows’ last great chief said, “nothing happened” ever again (2).

The chief’s name, Plenty Coups, implies much of his nation’s story. Coup-sticks were planted to mark tribal boundaries that an uninvited non-Crow was not allowed to pass; and Crow warriors—especially those called “Crazy-Dogs-Wishing-to-Die”—had to defend the boundaries with their lives. Lear writes, “This was a paradigm of courage,” but then asks: “Why valorize this form of standing fast?” Because it signifies, he answers, that “*there is a fate worse than death*” (13–14). Until a brave had struck an enemy warrior with a coup-stick or performed some related act, he could not “count coups,” and unless he did so, he could not marry until he reached age twenty-five. Moreover,

The wife of a coup-counting warrior could ride proudly ahead of her husband in a procession, carrying his shield; the wife of a non-coup-carrying man had to ride behind her husband. In ceremonial processions, the men who counted coups, along with their wives, rode first. (15)

7. Charles Taylor, “A Different Kind of Courage,” *New York Review of Books*, April 26, 2007, 4–8, at 4.

8. Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

“Imaginative-desiring-erotic-honor-seeking life was” — clearly — “organized around this kind of bravery” (15). At age sixteen, for instance, Bull Goes into the Wind (Plenty Coups’s childhood name) scalped a Sioux warrior but let him live, thereby disgracing him to such an extent that he was “forced to wear the dress of a squaw” by his tribe and “crawl through life in utter ignominy. The mark of the coward was upon him” (20). Lear comments on this story that “young Plenty Coups inflicted on this wretched Sioux a fate worse than death,” yet after reporting the anthropologist Robert Lowie’s assessment of scalping as “a ‘stunt’” — “a game” played “according to whimsical rules . . . interpreted in so conventional a way that often it bore no relation to true bravery whatsoever” — Lear assesses Lowie’s point of view as “parochial” and even ridiculous (20–21).

Because there is “Crow meaning” and “*Crow reality*,” Lear argues, Plenty Coups’s first coup “does count as brave” (18, 21). The Crows’ form of life, in other words, counts as “*a world*”:

One hallmark that one is dealing with *a world* is that relevant instances of the law of the excluded middle apply to it. . . . *Either our warriors will be able to plant their coup-sticks or they will fail* . . . is a typically Crow instance of the law of the excluded middle. . . . From the Crow perspective, nothing is being left out: these are all the possibilities there are. (24–25)

Raise some unnoticed possibility or imply the existence of one and, in the context of a culture whose “degree of integration is almost unimaginable” — a so-called organic culture — anomie will follow hard in its wake:⁹

It is just this assumption — that they have covered the field of possibilities — that breaks down for the Crow when they move onto a reservation. . . . Not surprisingly, those who survived suffered massive disorientation. Ambitious young men, wishing to establish themselves in the tribe, could think only in terms of warfare — but warfare had been forbidden. . . . This is a *real loss*, not just one that is described from a certain point of view. It is the *real loss of a point of view*. (25, 27, 32)

By this juncture in his account of the Crow, it is evident that Lear is not telling us about one culture and its loss, nor even about those cultures, the “organic” kind, whose integration makes them lethally vulnerable to change. Cultures generally, however complex or sophisticated they may be, have what Lear terms “insistence” in common:

Planting a coup-stick and counting coups were culturally embedded forms of insistence. In their Crow-like way, they insisted upon the real-

9. Taylor, “Different Kind of Courage,” 4.

ity of Crow life. And Crow life had reality because it could be insisted upon. (34)

My only problem with Lear's argument here is that I wish I could disagree with it. I wish I could supply even one example to the contrary: the argument is as inarguable with respect to Athens under Pericles or the Indian empire under Ashoka, as to the Crow Nation under Plenty Coups. Cultures *insist*, much as—Señor C reminds us—children *shout*:

Shouting is not simply talking writ loud and large. It is not a means of communication at all, but a way of drowning out rivals. It is a form of self-assertion, one of the purest there is, easy to practise and highly effective.¹⁰

Further, when Lear writes that, “in traditional Crow life, *everything* counted either as hunting or fighting or as preparation to hunt and fight,” I have a hard time thinking of cultures to exempt from the reach of that “*everything*”—as long as “hunting,” “fighting,” and “preparation” are understood figurally (40). I cannot even disagree that what follows on disruptions to traditional life includes changes in local temporality or phenomenology (“after this, nothing happened”).

Where I fall out of sympathy with Lear's case study and Taylor's overview of it is where they fret over Crow apathy. Lear quotes the granddaughter of a Crow woman who could not adjust to reservation life:

She would be working and talking—then immediately she would fall silent. She would continue to work, but she was silent. I would be with her, and I would sit silent and wait for her. I became accustomed to that, so I was a very quiet individual at times. Then she'd come up with this sound she always made, “Hummmm, aaahh.” (62)

Is the grandmother's silence an expression of apathy and despair, or of *realization*? Let me pose the same question about a postfascist: is there anyone who regrets the slow loss of Ezra Pound's voice after his release from American custody? Some have interpreted his silence as contrition (“words no good,” he explained to a frustrated reporter); but, in any case, his quiet, after years of *insistence* over Rome Radio, was salutary—and not just for admirers of modernist verse. Pound's silence was valuable, above all, for Pound.

Lear is justifiably awed by the affective and intellectual resources that Plenty Coups mustered to help the Crow go on after “the buffalo went away.” It was in a dream, the chief said, that he found hope for his people's future:

10. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, 213.

“Listen Plenty-Coups,” said a voice. “In that tree is the lodge of the Chickadee. He is least in strength but strongest of mind among his kind. He is willing to work for wisdom. The Chickadee-person is a good listener. Nothing escapes his ears, which he has sharpened by constant use. Whenever others are talking together of their successes and failures, there you will find the Chickadee-person listening to their words. But in all his listening he tends to his own business. He never intrudes, never speaks in strange company, and yet never misses a chance to learn from others. . . . The lodges of countless Bird-people were in the forest when the Four Winds charged it. Only one person is left unharmed, . . . the Chickadee-person. (70–71)

The Chickadee-person is—in Señor C’s terms, and my own—a quietist. “After this, nothing happened” and “Hummmm, aaahh” may both have been sighs of relief, if the Crow, on rethinking their past and its coups, believed that the Four Winds had set their people free. When Leopold forgives Molly Bloom her adultery in *Ulysses*, the reason that he gives himself is “the apathy of the stars.”

—Jeffrey M. Perl