

THE CULTURE OF DEATH, THE ONTOLOGY OF BOREDOM, AND THE RESISTANCE OF JOY

• Michael Hanby •

“Love and joy by their very act and existence make a radical ontological affirmation, and yet this affirmation is finally only intelligible if the world is created in the Father’s loving delight for the Son.”

When Pope John Paul II first denounced the modern West as a “culture of death” in the 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, he managed simultaneously to provoke scandal and sighs of complacency from a secular public largely satisfied with the comforts this society has afforded. While such sharp remonstrance certainly came as an affront to a culture giddy with its triumph over communism and brimming with optimism over the new world order ushered in by the victory of the free market, the encyclical’s characteristic concern for the aged, the unborn, and the souls of a people who increasingly see both as obstacles to be sacrificed on the altar of expediency or overcome through technological manipulation made it possible for those unconcerned with the spiritual and ontological basis of the Pope’s moral critique to dismiss the “culture of death” as the hyperbolic rant of yet one more conservative moralist.

Then came September 11, 2001, a day—we are incessantly told—when the world was forever changed. Yet one may wonder how well the secular imagination has grasped the nature of this change and whether its proposals to address terror’s “root causes” through

heightened security, increased surveillance, and ever more rapid economic development and political liberalization adequately address the complexity of the problem. A lingering orientalism, a heightened suspicion of “religion as such,” and a justifiable reluctance to “blame the victims” have led most commentators to treat the new omnipresent threat of terror not as an irruption within an increasingly globalized “culture of death,” consistent with the inner logic of that culture, but rather as the violent intrusion of a mysterious and sublime Other into a culture whose first principles are fundamentally at odds with its own.¹ And yet the barest facts of the case—the wealth and the perversely sophisticated use of technology by the hijackers, their known proclivity for video games and nightclubs, and reports of pornography and other illicit materials among their personal effects—suggest neither a recalcitrant medievalism nor a single-minded religious zealotry, but a far more complex picture of fragmented, postmodern selves whose forms of life appear deeply incompatible with the claims of the religious and ascetic disciplines allegedly motivating their attack.²

¹On the problems with the idea of “religion as such,” see William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002), 31–42.

²The latent orientalism of much of the commentary surrounding September 11 is refuted by a more basic set of conditions. “The setting up of ‘Islamic states’ and the application of ‘Islamic law’ is often seen—whether by West or by East—as the sign of the growth of alternative or anti-systemic forces and the spread of cultural diversity. ‘Nation state’ and ‘code of law’ are not categories peculiar to any uniquely Islamic way of life and thought but are common currency of the present world process, in the course of which former empires are collapsing via nationhood into a global market. In order to become a legislative system imposed by a constitution ‘Islamic law’ has to change its character completely. ‘Islamic law is not a code. This is why the frequently heard call for its ‘application’ is meaningless . . . shari’a is a general term designating good order . . . it is a body of narratives relating to precedents to which is ascribed a paradigmatic status.’” Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 54, citing Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: 1993), 12, 25. Indeed proponents of their brand of Islamic law can sound positively Hobbesian, leading one to speculate that whatever version of Islamic theology underwrites such acts is itself voluntarist and modern. “I should state that the government which is part of the absolute vice-regency of the Prophet of God is one of the primary injunctions and has priority over all other secondary injunctions, even prayers, fasting, and hajj. The ruler is authorized to demolish a mosque or a house which is in the path of a road and to compensate the owner for his house. The

These facts point to an “inside job,” at least superficially consistent with the deepest pathologies of a global, contemporary culture of death.

In the reflections to follow, I will consider the ontology of what I take to be the prevailing pathology of a culture of death now expanded to include not only the routinely efficient and systematic elimination of the unwanted and the unfit, justified by perverse utilitarian rationale, but the sudden eruption of heretofore unthinkable violence with no apparent rationale whatsoever. I do not claim in this exercise to account for all such violence by one single, overarching causal explanation, nor do I intend by it to exclude either those root causes typically invoked as explanations for these irruptions of terror or those remedies which typically follow these explanations. The causal factors leading to such violence are undoubtedly complex, and it is at any rate the very nature of evil as a privation to defy complete causal explanation; for this would be to give substance to a lack. Moreover, who would oppose the basic assurance of human dignity, due process, and a decent living standard for everyone? These are unexceptionable hopes, but in the end, I will suggest, they are insufficient in themselves, and moreover, the pragmatic proposals noted above are insufficient to achieve them. Rather, I hope in these reflections to offer a more fundamental diagnosis of the culture of death in both its normative and exceptional variations, with an eye toward a remedy ultimately unavailable to the modern secular imagination. I wish, in other words, to propose a culture of joy as the

ruler can close down mosques if needs be, or can even demolish a mosque which is a source of harm The government is empowered to unilaterally revoke any Shari’ah (Islamic law) agreements which it has concluded with the people when those agreements are contrary to the interest of the country or to Islam. It can also prevent any devotional or non-devotional affair that is opposed to the interests of Islam and for as long as it is so.” This excerpt from Ayatollah Khomeini’s letter, from *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, Part 4, 8 January 1988, is cited in Fred Halliday, “The Politics of Islamic Fundamentalism: Iran, Tunisia and the challenge to the secular state,” in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, ed. Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (London: Routledge, 1994), 100. Halliday notes first, that the concept of “absolute vice-regency” (*velayat-I mutlaq*) is a contemporary innovation, and second, that the same “sovereignty paradox” is characteristic of all voluntarisms: “Yet like all such legitimations it contained its contradiction: for the legitimation of the state and of the *faqih* lay in its fidelity to Islamic perceptions, and yet this authority, derived from Islam, was now being used to justify overriding whatever Islam enjoined.”

only genuine form of resistance to the culture of death and to contend that there is finally no secular solution for this culture and for terror.

1. *The ontology of boredom*

I am well aware that it may seem naive and even irresponsible to propose joy as an alternative to the cultural of death. Joy seems a trivial response to so grave a cultural diagnosis, and one distinguishing feature of this culture is that “the values of being are replaced with those of having,” setting in motion a frenetic orgy of consumption and a hedonistic celebration of the self and its pleasures. The culture of death is simultaneously a culture dominated by the notion of “entertainment.” The problem, one might argue, is not too little joy, but too much.

Yet if one considers many of the more garish artifacts of this culture—Las Vegas, Disneyworld, gnostic, digitalized forms of community and sexuality, a virtual arms race of violent spectacle and vulgar celebrity expressionism—or even the increasingly isolated character of entertainment through ever more personalized electronic devices, they seem less the expression of a celebration of the self, the pleasure principle or a will to power than the expression of an opposed and more fundamental pathology: boredom.

The advent of this concept of boredom coincides, tellingly, with the rise of bourgeois society and the triumph of industrialization. There is no etymological record of the word or the concept prior to the eighteenth century. Boredom differs in important ways from such antecedents as *ennui* or *acedia*. The diagnosis of these maladies traditionally contained within them a moral judgment of the subject, whose melancholy was understood as a moral and spiritual affront to a true and meaningful order of things.³ Boredom, by contrast, names a twofold failure of an altogether different kind: a failure of the world to be compelling to a subject ostensibly entitled to such an expectation *and* a failure or incapacity on the part of the subject to be compelled.⁴

³See John Cassian, *Institutes of the Coenobia*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 11 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1894), 10, especially 10, 2.

⁴Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11–12.

In this, boredom is closely aligned with hopelessness, and there may indeed be a more profound relation between the excesses of consumer society and the sense of helplessness that leads an increasing number of citizens of that same society to despair of social and political involvement.⁵ It is this double nullity of both subject and world, I contend, that underlies entertainment culture and the numbing array of cultural choices produced by it. The very notion of entertainment presumes the state of boredom as the norm, which means that a culture increasingly fueled by this notion assumes that our lives are innately and intrinsically meaningless without the constant stream of “stimulation” and distraction, a stream inevitably subject to the law of diminishing returns. This nullity on the side of the subject is matched by a similar noughting in the world, for latent in this assumption is a corollary denial of form, objective beauty, or a true order of goods that naturally and of themselves compels our interest. As a consequence, according to this cultural logic, all such choices can only be indifferently related to one another. None is intrinsically good or bad, and indeed no good approaches that of choice itself.⁶ Hence most citizens of the modern West, almost of necessity, live lives of profound fragmentation and internal contradiction, and yet these contradictions too frequently make no real competing claims on lives and loyalties and cause little pain or anguish to those who are subject to them. Yet the effect of many of these choices is less to please than to stupefy, anesthetize or distract us from the failed festivals, broken communities,

⁵It is insufficient, I think, to argue that people in Western democracies are simply too self-absorbed or comfortable to be politically active. This fails to account either for the lower level of political involvement among the lower classes, or the more subtle ways in which modern consumers fail to be self-absorbed. Instead one factor must result from the paradoxes of modern sovereignty: that a voluntaristic and individualistic conception of freedom requires the institution of an absolute power to police it. As a consequence, our freedoms tend to be restricted to a largely inconsequential “private” realm, which disguises the relative powerlessness of the atomized individual in the face of transcendental social mechanisms. This powerlessness and the hopelessness which ensues from it is to my mind a better, albeit not exhaustive explanation.

⁶For a scathing and stunning theological critique of this contemporary phenomenon, see David B. Hart, “Christ and Nothing,” in *First Things* 136 (October 2003): 47–57. I differ from Hart slightly in that I do not think, ultimately, that the telos of contemporary voluntarism is the will-to-power, but rather an impotence, a failure to will because of a failure to love which is arguably even more deadly and dangerous.

and otherwise empty existence imposed by a formless goalless world. Long before the advent of tasteless fast food, fat free cream, and an array of other products offering endless consumption *without* much discernible pleasure,⁷ Eric Gill foresaw these developments in his criticism of the Leisure State, which incarnates “at best, an impossible angelism, and at worst, an impossible aestheticism, the worship of the pleasure of sensation.”⁸

People won't really love the “good things” they enjoy in such plenty. They won't love them in the sense that they will see them and use them as holy things, things in which

⁷Slavoj Zizek has noted the philosophical importance of such cultural artifacts, though I dissent from the importance he attaches to them: namely that the removal of malignant properties is a refusal of the Real understood most fundamentally *as* the malignant. See Slavoj Zizek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 95–96: “The ‘postmetaphysical’ survivalist stance of the Last Men ends up in an anemic spectacle of life dragging on as its own shadow. In today’s market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol . . . And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today’s tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances, and has an ecologically sound, holistic approach to reality, while features like wife-beating remain out of sight)?”

⁸Eric Gill, “The Leisure State,” in *It All Goes Together* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1944), 162. One might add to Gill’s perspective that of Friedrich Nietzsche. “When [the philosopher] thinks of the haste and hurry now universal, of the increasing velocity of life, of the cessation of all contemplativeness and simplicity, he almost thinks that what he is seeing are the symptoms of a total extermination and uprooting of culture. The waters of religion are ebbing away and leaving behind swamps or stagnant pools; the nations are again drawing away from one another in the most hostile fashion and long to tear one another to pieces. The sciences, pursued without any restraint and in a spirit of the blindest *laissez faire*, are shattering and dissolving all firmly held belief; the educated classes and states are being swept along by a hugely contemptible money economy. The world has never been more worldly, never poorer in love and goodness. The educated classes are no longer lighthouses or refuges in the midst of the turmoil of secularization; they themselves grow daily more restless, thoughtless and loveless. Everything, contemporary art and science included, serves the coming barbarism” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 148).

and by which God is manifest. In reality they will despise everything. Things will be made only for passing enjoyment, to be scrapped when no longer enjoyable.⁹

Given his own characterization of this state, Gill might better have recognized that both the “angelistic” denial of incarnate form and the bland “worship” of sensation are not alternatives, but rather complementary facets of a single ontological judgment whose expression is the boredom he so wonderfully diagnosed. For it is the malaise of boredom, and not the will to power or pleasure, that is the full-flower of the voluntarism at the root of the culture of death, because it is boredom that finally completes voluntarism’s nominalist project of denying the compulsion of transcendental beauty, goodness, and truth in the mediation of particular finite forms.¹⁰ In boredom, in our indifference to the vast array of numbingly indifferent choices, we see not only the nominalistic evacuation of finite form, but the evacuation of both the desire ordered to and dependent upon that form and the self-gift compelled by its claims upon our desire. This is to say, ironically, that it is only in boredom that we see voluntaristic freedom finally negating itself.¹¹

And yet freedom is not all that is lost. A world that is “beyond good and evil,” in which nothing is either genuinely good or genuinely bad, and no truth, goodness, or beauty are revealed, is a world in which nothing is either intrinsically desirable or detestable. Such a world affords no possibility of seeing and using things as holy, which means to some degree letting them *be*, because in such a world there can *be* no holy things. Boredom is therefore the defining condition of a people uniquely in danger of losing their capacity to love, that is, a

⁹Gill, “The Leisure State,” 162.

¹⁰On voluntarism and the culture of death, see John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, I, 19. As I read it, the worship of sensation functions simultaneously as a distant reflection of the desire for God, and as an attempt to escape the Godless world we attempt to create through voluntaristic freedom. It is, in other words, a perverse *imitatio dei* which cannot but confirm what it denies.

¹¹Of course this assumes, with Augustine and the whole of Christian tradition, that freedom logically consists not simply in the spontaneous movement of the will, as it would for the voluntarists, Descartes, and Kant, but rather in living as one wishes, which is to say, in happiness. As a consequence, freedom, whether human or divine, is dependent upon a relationship to another: in our case, to God, in God’s case, to himself in the eternal kenosis of trinitarian love.

people uniquely in danger of failing to grasp “the mystery of [its] own being” and losing its very humanity.¹²

Such a danger is inherent in the culture of death, obsessed with “programming, controlling, and dominating birth and death.”¹³ Beneath this obsession, of course, lies a deep confusion exacerbated both by the reductive utilitarianism of the reigning market ideology and by the biological ideologies which have emerged from it and underwrite it.¹⁴ The ontological condition of possibility for both is the voluntarist reduction of form to force, and the subsequent effect of all is the reduction of human life and being to the status of a “‘thing,’ which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation.”¹⁵

From within this diagnosis, it is quite easy to see at least two senses in which this voluntarism undergirds those features of contemporary culture most thoroughly criticized by the Pope a decade ago, the use of science to subordinate vulnerable life routinely and fatally to the machinery of social and economic efficiency. First, the evacuation of all intrinsic meaning of human being is a precondition for this subordination. Secondly, the evacuation of all form more generally

¹²John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, I, 22. See Augustine, *De Trinitate* XIV, 12, 15: “The trinity of the mind is not really the image of God because the mind remembers and understands and loves itself, but because it is also able to remember, love, and understand him by whom it was made.”

¹³John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, I, 22.

¹⁴Boyle, *Who Are We Now?*, 27: “Thatcherism sees the whole function of society as the process by which the labor of the entire population, regarded as an undifferentiated mass of individual workers, is directed to meet the desires of that same population, regarded as an undifferentiated mass of individual consumers. This vision is not fundamentally different from that of the Marxist states, in which, however, the converse process obtains: consumption is directed in accord with production. Neither vision contains a conception of society as encompassing a plurality of functions, groupings, or interests, or of a public, political realm as a place where these elements are accommodated to each other in a principled and rational way.” As Boyle makes clear, the precondition for this “efficient” re-imagining of society is the reduction of human identity to the economic functions of production and consumption. For more on the alliance between market ideology and contemporary biology, see Michael Hanby, “Creation Without Creationism: Toward a Theological Critique of Darwinism,” *Communio* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 654–694, and Richard C. Lewontin, *Biology as Ideology: The Doctrine of DNA* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

¹⁵John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, I, 22.

(and with it, any recognition of objective beauty, an order of goods, or a consequent ordering of time which displaces the preeminent value assigned to productivity) is the precondition for the creation of a literally restless culture, without sleep or Sundays, where such inefficient persons have no place and an indifferent culture is unable to view the questions of abortion, euthanasia, and genetic engineering in the light of more fundamental goods.¹⁶

Yet one may also relate these criticisms to that new feature of the culture of death, namely, the sudden irrational eruption of terror. First, it should be noted that, in the wake of the voluntarist denial of form, the evacuation of the transcendentals, and the loss of an analogy of being, it is precisely this sort of eruption, this diremptive intrusion upon the realm of representation of an awful sublimity from beyond representation, that comes for modernity to denote an encounter with the Real. The Kantian sublime, dissociated from the phenomenal mediation of beauty, has become, to use the words of John Milbank, the modern transcendent.¹⁷ This is true across an astonishing range of cultural formations, in much of the visual art since the mid-nineteenth century, in the postmodern “ethicalization” of the void in Levinas and Derrida, in psychoanalytic theory which sees the individuation of subjectivity, not, like Balthasar, in the adoration of a mother’s gaze, but in an originary trauma.¹⁸ Such eruptions, which disrupt every form, function in a fashion analogous, ironically enough, to the ever more exotic distractions of entertainment punctuating the phenomenal realm

¹⁶One might note our culture’s desperate war on silence as an index of both the “restlessness” of a society without Sundays and of our consequent inability to contemplate the mystery of our own being (*Evangelium Vitae*, I, 22). If one needs empirical evidence of this war, only try avoiding the intrusions of cellular phones, laptop computers, and other personal entertainment devices in any public space.

¹⁷John Milbank, “Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent,” in *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas, David Martin and Paul Morris (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 258–284.

¹⁸Or in Lacan’s case, the mother’s love experienced as originary trauma. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 59–91. Žižek (p. 153) poses a question of interest to our analysis of a relationship between boredom and terror: “what if what these unfortunate intellectuals cannot bear is the fact that they lead a life which is basically happy, safe, and comfortable, so that, in order to justify their higher calling, they have to construct a scenario of radical catastrophe?”

of the Same. And yet, seen as absolute eruptions, without analogy, they become univocal and thus collapse back into that realm.

So, one might conclude, terror occupies an implicit but important place *within* the social ontology of the culture of death.¹⁹ To a culture virtually deaf to the call of the good and immune from the solicitations of the beautiful, it marks the site where the Real intrudes upon an undifferentiated phenomenal realm. Less abstractly (and undoubtedly, some will say, less implausibly), we can suggest another, more practical role for boredom in the advent of an era governed by terror. If, as Rowan Williams suggests in his meditation upon September 11, we consider the incongruent lives and horrific actions of the hijackers not in the context of a lingering Western orientalist view of geopolitics and Islam, but in the context of a treacherous fate for a generation of young men the world over, if we consider September 11 on the analogy, not of Pearl Harbor, but of the Columbine High School massacre, then a different picture, and a different set of questions, emerge. Why is it the case, for instance, that young men throughout this postindustrial world culture seem particularly vulnerable to the enticements of ever more senseless and ever more spectacular violence?

Contesting the adequacy of more conventional explanations for the “root causes” of terror, Williams demands that we consider what other, more pervasive and fundamental features of modern life might help account for such disparate and yet similarly senseless acts of violence. And he suggests that we must come to terms with the social and psychological effects of a culture which recognizes neither intrinsic meaning nor objective, substantive goods. Not only does this generate a sense of powerlessness in the face of an unjust global social mechanism governed by economic power and military force, but it creates the far deeper, more intrinsic sense of despair and hopelessness

¹⁹After all, one implication of the new globalization is that there no longer is an “outside.” Hardt and Negri offer a deft, even a remotely Augustinian analysis of how such threats function within an imperial framework that knows no external to legitimate that framework. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 2000), 3–21, 183–190. See also, Augustine, *De Civ.*, IV, 15.

resulting from the false utopia of infinite, inconsequential choices, and affords remarkably few avenues for intrinsically meaningful lives.²⁰

Williams observes that we may have reached the end of traditional war. “No longer do we see declarations of hostilities between sovereign states equipped with roughly comparable resources; no longer do we think of standing armies in the field.”²¹ No longer either, do we possess the coherence of a narrative that could—for the first time in history—motivate entire generations of young men in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to mobilize for war and to see such service as a form of self-sacrifice or a proving ground for virtue, as problematic as that may be.²² Though Western states continue to make such grand appeals, they are increasingly less convincing, and war as fought by the Allies is now the province of specialists, largely conducted both out of public view and with relatively little public pain.²³

While the power of the state still knows no real opposition (current arguments about its displacement by the global market notwithstanding) its day as the repository of human hopes has entered its twilight, leaving shadows of ambivalence in its passing.²⁴ In the West, such ambivalence often leads, among the privileged classes, either to one or other form of anesthetization—the suburban nihilism of consumer culture, substance abuse, or both—or to various kinds of

²⁰Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11th September and its Aftermath* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002), 31–51.

²¹*Ibid.*, 39.

²²See for instance, Michael Hanby, “War on Ash Wednesday: A Brief Christological Reflection,” in *New Blackfriars*, vol. 84, no. 986 (April 2003): 168–178.

²³In his 1998 Reith Lectures on the BBC, “War in Our World,” military historian John Keegan recounted the dreadful, daily ritual of telegraph deliveries bringing bad news from the front to English villages and neighborhoods. In some, nearly all the young men were lost, which obviously exacted a terrible cost from every family and entire towns. While it is in one sense surely an advance to be beyond those days, such advance has been purchased at the price of great imbalances of power, and they have bred fantasies of painless war that institute a dangerous psychological distance between combatants, make war easier to initiate, and invite terror from the powerless.

²⁴See Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 9–52, 97–122; Boyle, *Who Are We Now?*, 69–120.

thrill-seeking subcultures, some violent some not.²⁵ And what of those who do not share in this prosperity, or in the case of the Al Qaeda hijackers, those of relative prosperity in a context of despair? “To become part of a threatened minority struggling at immense cost, even the risk of violent and horrible death, to defend justice or true faith is one way out of meaninglessness.”²⁶ In other words, terrorism provides a way out of the profound hopelessness and despair intrinsic to a world of boredom, offering both a false hope of glory and martyrdom and a (false) agency in bringing about just the sort of eruption that the world of boredom identifies with the Real.

The culture of death is thus not the result of hedonistic excess. We lack the souls to be good hedonists, which, in present circumstances, would be a moral achievement. Rather, in both its normative and exceptional guises, the culture of death is the poison fruit, excessive despair, born of a world made boring by our “freedom” and a freedom made deadly by our boredom.

2. The ontology of joy and the culture of life

The pervasive boredom of our age is a sure sign of its nihilism and complicity in various ways in the culture of death. And if boredom names a relationship between self and world, or rather a failed relationship, so too does joy, the simultaneous delight and rest in another. Whereas boredom denies intrinsic meaning and compelling form on the part of the world and the compulsion of desire on the part

²⁵Williams, *Writing in the Dust*, 42–43: “Brecht may have said, ‘Happy the land that has no need of heroes’ but, in his desire to keep at arm’s length a false glorification of war, he missed the significance and attraction of a culture that allows some dignity to risk. When this is unrecognizable or in short supply in the ordinary discourse of a society, people will seek it out in strange places, hungry for danger, drama, meaning. We might cast a glance at our own backyards, at the fate of the young male in an environment of systematic poverty and unemployment. The least thoughtful are swept into petty-criminal subcultures (joy-riding, gangs); the more reflective may join the kind of pressure group, right or left, that promises feverish and dangerous activism. Some travel across the world in search of places and causes where heroism is possible.” Williams leaves out of his assessment the fate of the young in affluent sectors of the West, and here the nihilistic enticements of consumer culture and the fact of widespread substance abuse within this group are significant.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 44–45.

of the agent, joy affirms both. As the delight and rest in another, the very act or condition of joy itself presupposes the solicitation of form. The act itself assumes that the other in its very specificity manifests a beauty, and is possessed of a goodness which, though pleasing to me precisely because its goodness and beauty are objective, are not reducible to my pleasure. Consequently, the cultivation of joy is essential if the reductive, instrumentalist view of reality underpinning the culture of death is to be resisted.

To make good on this claim, we must do more to distinguish joy philosophically from either the escapist pleasure of the consumer economy or the rapacious consensual exploitation which increasingly marks the human relationships formed by that economy.²⁷ The first thing to note is that joy, presupposing relation, is responsive to the prompting of another. It is of its very nature reciprocal, which is not necessarily to say that this always and everywhere entails that joy is mutual. Rather, to say that joy is reciprocal is to say that it implies both a giving and a receiving, or rather, a giving that is itself a receiving, and a reception that solicits a free gift. Each is crucial. Absent the self-gift, the loss and repose of oneself in the compelling beauty and goodness of another, the other simply becomes an object of consumption, the apparatus necessary for me to “love” myself, and joy becomes indistinguishable from the fleeting “pleasures” of the market, whose capacity to please, we have seen, results less from form or essence than from their instrumentality.²⁸ And it is precisely in the concrete, “sacrificial” character of self-loss, the action that simultaneously

²⁷On the increasingly contractual form of all human relations, see Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 43–46.

²⁸Given that love presupposes the desirability and prior gift of the beloved, one must insist here, with Augustine, that self-love which is not simultaneously love of God and neighbor is not really self-love at all. See *De Civ.*, XV, 5, “A man’s possession of goodness is in no way diminished by the arrival, or the continuance, of a sharer in it; indeed, goodness is a possession enjoyed more widely by the united affection of partners in that possession in proportion to the harmony that exists among them. In fact, anyone who refuses to enjoy this possession in partnership will not enjoy it at all; and he will find that he possesses it in ampler measure in proportion to his ability to love his partner in it.” See also, *De Civ.* XIX, 14: “Now God, our master, teaches two precepts, love of God and love of neighbor; and in them man finds three objects for his love: God, himself, and his neighbor; and a man who loves God is not wrong in loving himself. It follows, therefore, that he will be concerned also that his neighbor should love God, since he is told to love his neighbor as himself.”

identifies my good with that of another *and* still is willing to suffer for refusing absolutely to conflate them, that one can hope to counter the all-too pervasive suspicion, whether in postmodern philosophy, liberal economics, or Darwinian biology, that no real self-gift is possible.²⁹ Yet without a genuine reception of goodness and beauty from another, without the return of *delight*, there is neither genuine rest, nor even genuine self-gift, but rather only the stern, sacrificial abnegation of self in duty.³⁰ Ironically, it is through an ill-conceived altruism, the happy face of voluntarism, that joy becomes the wearisome fiction which modernity has always suspected.

So if joy is genuinely to be, and to be itself, it must take the form of an active-reception. While this may insulate the notion from the pleasure of escapist consumption, it is not yet sufficient to differentiate joy from consensual exploitation, an only slightly less auto-affective manifestation of the same pathos. Joy, it should be clear by now, is very similar to, indeed the fruit of, love. Like love, it presupposes the goodness and beauty of another as the basis of desirability and confirms it in an act which simultaneously identifies and differentiates the good of lover and beloved.³¹ Yet to recognize the goodness and beauty of another is to recognize something at once intrinsic to the other and simultaneously irreducible to it. Which is to say that to desire and delight in another, to give oneself and to receive oneself from another in a relationship of reciprocity is simultaneously for each to be committed to a third: to a form both inherent in the other and transcending each of the partners. As the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, the delight between the Father and the Son, constitutes a third irreducible to them and embracing them both, so too will a reciprocal joy in the beauty and goodness of another translate concretely into a third—a child, a rule of life, a craft, a friendship or marriage including but not

²⁹See John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995): 119–161.

³⁰Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 90–105; John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (London: Blackwell, 1997), 219–232.

³¹Which is why, incidentally, I would contend that the act of love is incompatible with atheism: because love, precisely insofar as it is love, affirms and expresses hope in an objective goodness whose conditions of possibility are ultimately theological. Hence precisely insofar as love, and thus the *imago dei*, can not be completely effaced in us, the triumph of a culture of death can never be total.

exhausted by mutual pleasure—which has its own integrity and transcends individual possession.³² Moreover, precisely inasmuch as joy entails transcendence, it strives for eternity, in contrast to the contrived obsolescence of escapist pleasure.

Indeed, insofar as finite forms mediate the transcendentals, joy, whose act embraces those transcendentals precisely as they are mediated, does not simply strive for eternity, but participates in them in a couple of distinct, but interrelated senses which serve to differentiate joy from love even in their intimate relation. First, just as boredom performs and presupposes an ontological judgment, so too does joy. In fact, one might properly say that, given boredom's failure to be moved, only joy finally acts in this way.³³ Joy is unintelligible apart from the enduring embrace of love; indeed it is the fruit of this embrace. Love, as simultaneous self-gift and desire, is only intelligible as moved by goodness, and the very act, in loving, in simultaneously desiring and giving, affirms the independent goodness of the beloved and allows the beloved simply to be unto itself, precisely in being embraced.³⁴ So joy, as the fruit of love, performs a judgment about the world beyond the lover, and yet this judgment can only be true, the beloved can only genuinely *be* good, if indeed it mediates a goodness and reveals a beauty that transcends it, that is, if it is itself the fruit of a love which in loving, bestows diffusive goodness upon it in its very specificity.³⁵ Both love and joy presuppose the prior claims of beauty

³²See Augustine, *De Trin.*, VI, 10, 12: "For in that Trinity is the supreme source of all things, and the most perfect beauty, and the most blessed delight. Those three, therefore both seem to be mutually determined to each other, and are in themselves infinite."

³³Of course one might wish to insist here that, as a failure to be moved, boredom is a reflection of what Augustine called deficient causality.

³⁴For the best account of the freedom latent in this understanding that I know of, see D.C. Schindler, "Freedom Beyond Our Choosing: Augustine on the Will and Its Objects," *Communio* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 618–653.

³⁵Aquinas says that God's knowledge, or rather, his intellect, is the cause of things, "insofar as His will is joined to it" (*ST I*, 14, 8). Given the Augustinian-Thomist identification of will with love of goodness, and given divine simplicity, this effectively means that creation is an effect of the relation of love between Father and Son. "Hence, although God wills things apart from Himself only for the sake of the end, which is His own goodness, it does not follow that anything else moves His will, except His goodness. So, as He understands things apart from Himself by understanding His own essence, so He wills things apart from Himself

and goodness, and the reality of finite beauty and goodness are finally dependent upon a higher love not our own. Love and joy by their very act and existence make a radical ontological affirmation, and yet this affirmation is finally only intelligible if the world is created in the Father's loving delight for the Son. It is in fact the Father's judgment upon the world in the kenotic sending of the Son, his letting be of the Son as creature subject to death, and his raising of Christ, transfigured, that finally completes the judgment of Genesis inaugurating the eternal sabbath of the eighth day: it is very good.

The Resurrection at once manifests the Father's delight in the Son and glorifies creation, elevating it into the eternal sabbath of God's own delight. This adds a second dimension to joy that further enriches our sense of how joy both affirms and participates in the eternal and the transcendent. Joy, as I have suggested, is closely aligned to love. Yet unlike some "lower" forms of love, joy does not seek an end beside itself. It is, properly speaking, pointless. This imbues joy with a certain contemporaneity that mimics eternity in time in both a superficial and a profound sense. The experience of joy as abiding precisely as experienced is the superficial sense. More profoundly, to say that joy is both pointless and that it is the fruit of love's embrace is to say that in joy we overcome an immemorial metaphysical opposition, in the simultaneity of act and repose. Where joy is lacking, act and repose are bifurcated. The ultimate practical effect is to make work itself formless, preoccupied with the management of efficient causes, and to oppose rest as a kind of escape. Where joy is present, where work is moved by delight in its products, rest is incorporated into its very structure.

These "oppositions" coincide perfectly, of course, in God's trinitarian nature. God himself is joy: the good of all goodness, the perfect coincidence of giving and receiving, and the perfection of delight, beyond beginning, goal, or end. As Trinity God is both perfect act and perfect rest, and is each "because" he is the other.³⁶ It is this that is the source of any claim creation has to real goodness, and

by willing His own goodness" (*ST I*, 19, 2, ad 2). "Good is the object of the will. The words, therefore, Because God is Good we exist [Augustine, *De Doct. Christ.* I.32], are true inasmuch as His goodness is the reason of His willing all other things" (*ST I*, 19, 4, ad 3).

³⁶See Maximus Confessor, "Chapters on Knowledge," in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), I, 15.

this that every instance of true joy presupposes and affirms. Especially when ordered to the worship of God himself, it is love between humans that most closely approximates that joy. Yet this is not to say that joy is to be reserved to describe the fruit of love between persons. If finite form is in principle revelatory, in principle capable of eliciting our affection and affording us rest, then by degrees of remoteness from the archetype, all genuine joy, all delight that recognizes intrinsic goodness, will reflect Trinitarian bliss. Hence a culture of joy will be just as preoccupied as the culture of death with the character of human productions. Indeed it will pay special attention to the production of both material forms and forms of life in which the transcendent commitments integral to joy and integral to human production can flourish.³⁷

Only a joyous people can sustain pointless activity, festivity, and rest. Only a people who can sustain pointless activity, festivity, and rest can be joyous. And only a joyous people can finally resist the culture of death, because only through the embrace of pointless activity and the repose in finite forms can we resist this culture's evacuation of substance and its identification of the Real with the eruption of transcendental violence. In other words, joy, with its delight in the intrinsic, its commitment to the transcendent, and its repose in the transcendent through its embrace of finite form, is absolutely essential to the good order and to the genuine letting be of any properly human activity, and indeed proper human being. It is difficult to imagine that a culture which does not know how to feast or how to pray, which makes no distinction between hours of the day or the days of the week, and has forgotten how to mark the passage of time with seasons of celebration and solemnity, will be capable of great art, music or craftsmanship or that it will be able to sustain marriage, rear children, or fulfill the natural obligation between generations in caring for the

³⁷Philosophers from Plato to MacIntyre have recognized the importance of distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic goods in the discharge of a craft. I hope to call attention here to an analogous relationship: the profound relationship between the quality and rationale of our cultural artifacts and the disciplines and dispositions necessary to produce them. I would suggest that the ability to retain the rationale of intrinsic goods is absolutely integral to a people's capacity for joy, that is, for taking rest in the objective beauty and goodness mediated by finite forms. Hence the dual concern for our cultural productions, with the concern for the producers being more than a consequentialist concern for justice.

sick and the dying.³⁸ For such a culture will be unable to attend to the compulsions of form, and it will lack the patience to produce artifacts that are compelling. It will fail to discriminate between internal and external goods, because it will know no internal goods, and indeed no internality. Conversely, all such mundane actions, precisely in their pointlessness because they are their own end and involve us in attention and commitments that transcend the parties involved, resist the corrosive force of the culture of death.³⁹ Hence all such activities and institutions, which do not have an overt economic rationale, are in our time under intense assault.

Of course more than “just” traditional social institutions and practices are at stake here, but rather the intelligibility of humanity *per se*. Such institutions, which bind us in disciplined forms of life, are the concrete expression of our acknowledgment that the world outside of our desires is inherently and objectively meaningful. They thus actualize our willingness to be compelled by the beauty and goodness of the world and are ultimately the condition of possibility for our freedom.⁴⁰ Secondly, such institutions and practices mediate both our location in the coordinates of time and space, but also, and partly for this reason, our own experience as en-souled, embodied creatures.⁴¹ Our bodies, like our identities which they mediate, are never just brute, material givens. They never exist for us without form or intelligibility. And yet this intelligibility is acquired and performed through time, even as time is itself the vehicle for the revelation of the eternal. When the prevailing voluntarism empties the world of

³⁸By the “intergenerational obligation” I do not mean charity in its modern form of abstract benevolence, or even the welfare state, laudable as this might be, each of which has contributed to the creation of industries that allow both the old and the young to exist largely out of societal view, under the care of strangers. Rather I mean a form of obligation, socially embodied, that instantiates the obligations of friendship.

³⁹One might see in such a context room for the flourishing of what Rowan Williams calls the “local and unexciting heroism that we have ignored in our restless passion for drama,” born of “habits slowly and even drearily formed over years.” That such heroism did flourish on September 11 is a sign that creation is still creation, and that the victory of the culture of death is not and could never be total. See Williams, *Writing in the Dust*, 47–48.

⁴⁰This assumes, once again, that freedom consists in the realization of our desire for the good in action.

⁴¹See Boyle, *Who Are We Now?*, 35–67.

substance, when the market reduces our humanity to the moment of production and consumptions, time disappears, and humanity is emptied of itself.

The result is boring, a sleepless, soulless Sundayless world of flattened spaces and indifferent choices. But it is not simply boring.

It is deadly.

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