Ultra
Dead Reckoning
Aug 18, 2015

http://www.ultra-com.org/project/dead-reckoning/

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Dead Reckoning

Ultra

Aug 18, 2015

Loving armed.
— **Ultra**

Contents

of treetop and mountain ridge and you contemplate for a moment that sound, the call of the whippoorwill, nightjars such a strange and frail nation of creature which binds its nest in the mulch of the forest floor laying soft eggs and praying maybe as much as any animal can that nothing will come along by chance or circumstance to crush them, to suck out the yolk before lumbering on into darkness.

The stars are just visible. The clear cuts have ended and the forest ahead of you is thick and ancient. It seems to suck in the darkness like a deep breath, exhaling a wind filled with the sweet stink of pine warmed against granite. With every gust, the foliage of the weeping spruce shivers. Pinecones drop like dice. You stare back along the road, barely visible in the darkness—of such strange magnitude that it seems not even to have been built by humans but dropped maybe by some itinerant god who had no use for it. And you can only wonder at that obscure disaster: Did we ever really think we knew where we were going? That there was just this one path to get there?

But what of those birds that lay their eggs on bare earth? When you turn the moon is the color of ice melting into black soil, the horizon limned with it and you know that the cold, blue-fired liquid will sink into the tops of the mountains and into the forest's many throats, channeled through branches and mycelia and finally into the million warm and ancient hearts sitting deep down in things. You know that the nightjars lay their eggs for love and love only, that without hope there is at least love in the darkness, that gamble against all odds that the eggs not be dashed apart by some passing behemoth.

And you can only cradle your lost cause for love, loving wild and desperate in the face of that determined destitution—loving as one can only love in free plummet to doom and freed maybe at last of doom in the only way possible: through loving. Loving organized. Loving aimed at that horizon, dead reckoning by the stars.

dead insurrections that communists become leftists of one sort or another, christening the corpse a "movement."

If acting during the insurrection, riot or whatever seems relatively straightforward, the empty stretches between such events pose a greater problem. They, of course, constitute the majority of our lives. What are we to do when these openings are closed—when the riot has ended, the smoke has cleared and they're having another goddamn election as if the last five years just hadn't happened? Since nothing big is occurring, it becomes common to confuse the domesticated with the undomesticated, desperately convincing oneself that purely activist "actions" can somehow exceed their strictly-established boundaries. If the do-nothings have any insight, it is in their simple dismissal of the mirages that arise in these lulls.

Rather than courage, we might better portray our activity in these cold seasons as the simple, boring work of science—returning finally to the Naturalists. It is a process of research and training, in which we can learn what the limits were last time, where the world's weaknesses lie and where potentials might open in the future. It is the process of making strength. But it's also guided by an extreme pessimism, where results are presumed false until proven otherwise. It appears to be quietism, defeatism, cynicism, the abandonment of "the movement." We will, inevitably, be lumped in with the do-nothings. But really we are just renewing our contact with that bitterness that is at the heart of things—systematizing it into a science, strengthening our reflexes, making friends.

The Beginning

You are standing on the crumbled edge of that old road abutting wilderness, insects digging in the rank, seed-littered soil below as whippoorwills call out into the darkness, the moon not yet risen but visible as a slight glow over that distant, jagged division

The following is a sort of response to an article some friends of ours wrote, called Hic Nihil, Hic Salta! (a critique of Barltebyism). *Their article is a diagnosis of the "nihilist turn in communist and anarchist thought," written to "provoke conversation." We think that attempts to provoke conversation are generally tricks, the equivalent of opening with: "we just want to talk." But we like our friends, and this particular article provides an ideal context for a few hypotheses that we had already been drafting, so we have recomposed the material as a response. Rather than talking about nihilists, though, we wrote an article about nihilism.*

> In the desert
> I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
> Who, squatting upon the ground,
> Held his heart in his hands,
> And ate of it.
> I said, "Is it good, friend?"
> "It is bitter—bitter," he answered;
>
> "But I like it
> "Because it is bitter,
> "And because it is my heart."
>
> — Stephen Crane

The End of the Road

There is a curious symmetry in the way that bodies are broken by work and by the lack of it. Old men, long unemployed, raise their bottles in sun-leathered hands. They slouch in lawn chairs dragged into the empty lot across from the single grocery store in a town whose name passers-by soon forget. Nearby, young men and women sit cross-legged in the dust, clutching their cigarettes between fingers scarred by wood, stone and metal, depending on

their occupation. Ancient oaks stretch their limbs above old and the young alike, dappling the ground with a small reprieve of shade. The fires have not started burning yet, but they are there, waiting—in a drought winter there is no snowpack and the wildfires, even when extinguished, can retreat into the forest's root systems, slow-burning in hibernation until the earth above breaks with the heat of another summer and the flames emerge like starving bears.

The old and the young speak little, their empty eyes staring off into the tides of heat rising off the long-abandoned road. Some have the bright, sunken eyes of tweakers—that special way that meth gouges out the eye sockets like it is a mortar and the skull a pestle, grinding down human vision until it is at its most sparse and violent. If you know meth you know that it eviscerates, but also that it delivers to its adherents an unnamable, fleeting glimpse of some great truth just beyond their grasp. For a brief moment, before a death by back-stabbing, dessication or glorious, pyrrhic dumbassedness, every tweaker attains the bitter insight of the fool. While the others stare at the heat or the trees or inwardly ponder the eternal problems of food, money and fucking, the tweakers stare behind the old road, behind the mindless oak trees and the heat-bent air, watching for the lumbering movements of that sublime monstrosity buried deep inside even the most banal of moments.

From the air the town would barely be visible through the thick forest. Aside from the grocery store there is a single gas pump and a spattering of RV parks, all plastered with paintings of sasquatch—our *santa muerte.* The abandoned road bisects a less abandoned one. Hitchhikers shuffle along it, clutching propane tanks to their chests like giant eggs. Some are the bearded remnants of the old hippie communes, some are Karuk, Hoopa or Yurok and others the meth-cooking ancestors of old timber and mining families. All were left behind by different receding tides. The road that is not abandoned stretches out to the sea, ending there in a mire of crane-picked salt flats and single-family homes with cardboard-stapled windows,

this wrestling—an accumulation of courageous acts performed in extremely close, messy contact with the violence of our present world—can we hope to fuse the divergent powers unleashed in such moments into a communist power, capable of building techniques that might have some chance of wounding our enemy, for once in our fucking lifetime.

In this we are not exactly "agents," though, since our actions can only be purely negative, *prefiguring nothing*. They merely clear the space in which something might, at some point, be able to happen. This is not the production of a mystical "clean slate," but simply the destruction of the vital systems of the present world and the distribution of its rubble—creating new constraints, certainly, but also potentials. Unlike the tweakers, we understand that we will not be reborn. Courage, therefore, is not the re-introduction of *hope* in a different form. We earnestly uphold the slogan which our friends foist in irony: *Hic Nihil, Hic Salta*. Here is nothing, jump here. Hope is the idea that you must wait for something to materialize before committing to the leap, as if the road to socialism might someday emerge from the darkness on the other side. Courage, in contrast, is the name for jumping without any guarantee—for the act performed in darkness. Rather than a secret "way out" of nihilism, courage is simply the name for procedures undertaken with a cool head in the face of the abyss. Dice plummeting off the precipice.

Any attempt to evangelize some new, encompassing alternative—to bridge the chasm, to build a new road—can result in nothing but an alternate management of the present. As communists, our pre-eminent thesis is that *we are blind to the future,* though we feel our way regardless. At the same time, we have to recognize the real results of our experiments, of which the vast majority—and maybe all—will be failures. Even feeling one's way forward, it is easy to get lost. Our attempts to dirty our hands can very quickly become, in the words of one-half of Monsieur Dupont, "gratuitous exercises in hand dirtying and nothing else." It is precisely by attempting to breathe life into

simple, practical work of overcoming the limits posed to whatever momentum has begun to accumulate—to prevent it from being diverted, drained or dammed by the enemy. We intervene, then, as one presently small force among a messy, divergent explosion of powers—of individuals and small groups acting collectively in some sense but also along wildly different trajectories. On this terrain the goal of a communist force is not primarily, or even at all, ideological. Obviously we make arguments, but these are ultimately given purchase *only in our actions*. And this is not to be misread: our actions are not in any way validated by whether or not they adhere to some miserable ethics—in other words, it doesn't matter how you vote in your fucking meetings, or how many times you say that you are anti-all-the-bad-things. What matters is whether or not you can stop what you've built from dying.

The determining factors here are, again, *actions* and *infrastructure*, rather than ideas. Our actions our validated—to return to Crane—in terms of their basic quotient of courage, and only via such acts do our words even begin to matter. Precisely because the moral regime has broken down does the insurrectionary moment *appear* to people in simple terms of honor and dishonor, defense and retreat, us and the police. In a strange way, then, the rejection of moralism leaves us not with some noble-minded *politics*, as our friends seem to hope, but instead with a sparse stoicism. There are the brave, and there are the cowards. People with the wrong ideas can still be brave people, and those with the right ideas can, of course, be cowards. Courage here is not an ethical term, then, but a *collective* designator for effective, admirable and magnetizing decisions—for tactical advances *that work*, or the construction of infrastructures that keep things going longer. One cannot be courageous in thought or word alone. Again, this is a messy, close-contact combat. It is impossible to stay clean.

Our small communist forces, then, are capable of grappling with the world around them, particularly but not only in the brief stretches when order seems to break down, and only through

their grow rooms buzzing in the darkness, casting slivers of UV light out onto the salted mud.

The abandoned road goes nowhere. Built to facilitate timber extraction during a brief economic boom in the 80s, the project was hindered by impassable mountains and legal challenges from the tribes. By the time the court cases were over the timber market had lulled again and there was no money to pay the engineers. The result was thirty miles of fresh pavement, complete with road paint and guardrails, all extending out deep into the wilderness, never to return. No houses lie along it. No one maintains it, so the asphalt is scattered with itinerant stones and storm-felled pines. The road itself ends abruptly at the site of an old burial ground. Grouse and quail flit across its last, unfinished sections of concrete and steel. At night, endangered owls settle in the branches of the weeping spruce, a rare relic species from the last ice age with pendulous foliage that shivers at every touch of wind. Beneath, the flames smolder.

Jump Here

We live at an unprecedented nearness to oblivion. The end of the road is a precipice and the dark wilderness beyond only dimly visible by the light of the stars. It's not a good place to live—that feeling of plummet, of waking up every morning to the slow, terrible grinding of the world toward what can only be catastrophe, of staring into the forest at night and not knowing what animals stare back at you. As communists, we are also unduly obligated to suffer. Like our friends say: "it's no surprise that communities that define themselves in opposition to the status quo are filled with the most wounded and miserable types." At least the tweakers get that mirage of the sublime—the salvific, monstrous sign of some unbearably bright future barreling down as time compresses itself, the body accelerated until it breaks. We don't even have sal-

vation, just supply chains. The road to socialism was abandoned a long time ago and we are left alone with the weeping spruce, at the imponderable conjunction of scarcity and luxury across a globe slowly plummeting to doom. The edge of every town has its darkness, night falling like a heavy object.

But our friends miss something important. We want to correct this. Their focus becomes too granular and the larger picture is lost. An inquiry into our era is replaced by a micro-anthropology of a clique within a scene that is as miserable as it is irrelevant. This clique goes under many names, and our friends mention several but ultimately group them together as a single object of inquiry: the "nihilist turn," or its literary designator: "Bartlebyism." The problem with this is not one of accuracy, but of a precision that obscures the underlying pattern. There is a frustrating movement to the intervention—the same feeling one gets when a leading actor is outshone by the antagonist and supporting cast, as if the focus had been wrong the entire time and a secret, better story existed underneath it all, taking place in margins and cut-scenes.

Their experiment is sabotaged by its own methods. One of the primary—and certainly accurate—problems that our friends identify is how the so-called "nihilist turn" tends to transform "a political process into a psychological operation; it substitutes an ethics for a politics." Yet the very method of their inquiry is itself psychoanalytic. It is a diagnosis of a wrong way of thinking, clearly in the hopes that this wrong thought can be rectified through argument. The diagnosis is not really incorrect—this is, after all, precisely what so many people within the scene do, and the application of ethics or morality in the place of politics has demonstrably bad consequences for all concerned. But why make the diagnosis in the first place? The target is too alluring, and it is approached on terrain of its own choosing—that of ethics, rather than politics, in which the question becomes one of whether or not to *do something*, whatever that means. The problem, in short, is that our

but they are just as much a product of real *constraints* on their situation, and they at least confront these limits with the guts and romance of their forebears. The same cannot be said of their American counterparts. There is more similarity between these young Greeks and the hose-slashing youth of Baltimore, then, than between self-designated "nihilists."

Because it is Bitter

Our interest is in the actual constraints faced in these situations and how we, as a handful of communists produced by this era, might operate within it. Again, we begin from the nihilist presumption of contingency. Nothing has worked, and nothing offers us any guarantee of what will. There is at least beauty in the acts of those crazy young Greeks, since they contain a modicum of bravery. It is, after all, entirely possible that the constraints of the present simply cannot be overcome. Acknowledging the situation's fundamental contingency means also acknowledging the possibility that nothing *will* work, in the end. We are throwing dice into the darkness.

Still, the turn to relatively outlandish acts of arson and the kneecapping of minor state functionaries seems to us like an understandable, but not particularly effective option, given our own situations. Such acts also quickly degenerate into their own form of LARPing, in which historical reenactment of the Bonnot Gang replaces the process of experimentation. Some activities have a certain confirmation bias built in. Once you burn down a few buildings, it's hard to admit that you might have been wrong.

As communists who are already thrown into these moments of crisis and insurrection, we obviously intervene in them—even if it's just to watch things burn. To us, however, it seems apparent that the most effective intervention is, right now, abundantly apolitical—or at least must seem as such to the "politics" of the left. A communist approach to recent events must emphasize the

> offer a cartoonish version of this story, in which proletarian self-activity was continually diverted, subverted, managed, contained and betrayed by the egoism, self-aggrandizement and incompetence of its would-be leaders. As such, while every attempt to hasten the arrival of such a revolution is useless today, tomorrow those selfsame activists will be an active hindrance. Therefore, the only meaningful activity that a group of communist writers can undertake in non-revolutionary times is to try to actively destroy the left, to neutralize their capacity to manage, contain or otherwise fuck-up revolutionary possibilities in the future […]

This is, of course, the problem with heresy. The heretics' own activity is nothing but the shadow cast by the very orthodoxy it rejects. It is determined by this orthodoxy and utterly unable to survive without it. In this instance, the "anti-," "post-," or "ultra-leftist" is, then, nothing but a parasite latched onto the desiccated corpse of the Stalinist Party or Anarchist Syndicate. Even if our friends tend to miss the actual insights in Monsieur Dupont's work, their critique holds. At least *Nihilism Communism* has some other things to say. The same is not true of other do-nothings, the result being that the most insufferable thing about most "nihilists" is that they simply will not shut up about the left.

If the "radical" left is irrelevant then the "nihilist" critiquing it is doubly-so. Our only concern in this regard, then, should be with the actual logistics of that more general, domesticated "left," since their institutions at least exert a *force* on the situation which is, in its ultimate effects, similar to that of the police. And these situations are messy. Many of our friends' diagnoses, in their simplification of the situation, tend to overreach. The Conspiracy of Cells of Fire, alongside their cohort of European *nouveau*-nihilists, for example, can maybe be critiqued for their elitist egoism—wake up, Sheeple—

friends spend so much time talking about nihilists that they forget about nihilism.

Rudderless

The turn to literature is not coincidental. Since the focus of the critique is on the psychology of these nihilists—or, more accurately: "nihilists, Lebowski"—fiction provides a relatively clean instrument with which to dissect the subject. Bartleby is an individual (non-)actor, sealed within the careful controls of the short story's experimental chamber. The psychology of his revolt can be explored and its results followed up on. History is added as an addendum, rather than the structuring environment of the story's own production. The psychological failings of the nihilists becomes a symmetrical narrative of betrayal—if only they were not do-nothings—and the cleaner moral laws of fiction replace the messy catastrophe of history, where ethics go to die.

But we are capable of responding to literature with literature, at least. Against Melville, though, we would pose a different kind of experiment in literary nihilism: that of the American Naturalists, whose fiction, by its own definition, is impossible to sever from its own historical production. The Naturalists were a loose collection of authors writing at the turn of the last century, often influenced by the French school of the same name, but born and bred in a uniquely American climate. Their connections to each other were tenuous, and they were never a self-designated literary "school" so much as an amalgamation of authors who, often without knowing one another, reproduced similar themes in response to similar environments. Their writing was simultaneously an evolution of realism—influenced by Darwinism and other contemporary scientific achievements—and a strict rejection of the American Romantic tradition, with their work frequently parodying Transcendental philosophy's focus on a sublime, pantheistic Nature. In contrast,

they portrayed Nature as a brutally indifferent force, evacuated of providence, and humanity itself lacking in both inherent goodness and inherent sin, instead simply crushed under its own history and fundamentally constrained by its biological inheritance and its material conditions, whether industrial or natural.

Unlike Melville's own, more ambiguous relationship to the politics of his writing, the Naturalists understood themselves as products of their era, and their writing as irrevocably a part of the historical tides that had placed them there. More importantly, they understood that nihilism inhered in their era, as it does in ours. And it was precisely this that allowed their luminaries—Stephen Crane, Jack London and Theodore Dreiser—to unabashedly align themselves with the causes of those left behind in the ghettoes of the industrial world, as well as with those insurgent against it. For Crane, this came in the shape of an individualist stoicism, while for Dreiser and London, it meant adherence to an explicitly communist political project, despite the utter darkness of the time in which they lived.

Today, they are remembered in distorted figures, if at all. Crane's polemic of partisan war against the industrializing slaughterhouse of 1890s America is recast as a story of patriotic sacrifice, to be grudgingly slogged through in high school English. London is remembered for writing about wolves, mostly, his politics reduced to simple Nietzschean bromance. Even more refined political taste tends to find their fusion of nihilism to communism unpalatable. Dreiser's prose is blunt and unadorned, sprinkled with cheap melodrama. Crane's individualism remains politically ambiguous, and in his life he strayed from collective projects. In his own words: "I was a Socialist for two weeks but when a couple of Socialists assured me I had no right to think differently from any other Socialist and then quarreled with each other about what Socialist meant, I ran away." The sentiment is more than a little reminiscent of Monsieur Dupont.

participants to ignore "leftist pricks" and their "group discussions." The discarding of the left is, in most locations, relatively easy. Leftists are not a significant force in most cities, and their degree of actual threat is inversely related to how "radical" they believe themselves to be. On average the "radical" leftist is physically weak, mentally incompetent and lacking in resolve.

More threatening is the leftism that has discarded its radical garb and instead operates at the general level, as a procedure of government. The NGO-complex was, in places like Oakland and Ferguson, perfectly complicit with the police in crushing the protests and buying off those who could be bought off—it was via NGOs, after all, that George Soros' $33 million investment into the Black Lives Matter "movement" was distributed, helping to behead the riots by offering a select number of their participants decent-paying jobs packaged with the promise of transforming ephemeral rage into long-lasting, systemic change. Meanwhile, in many cities the churches and unions work with the police directly, forming a second line of "peace police" in front of the riot cops and snitching on potential "troublemakers."

But these are mostly *recuperative* actions. The fact remains that, when things happen, they are *not caused by* leftists. They usually circumvent the left entirely. Even when an amalgamation of "radicals" are present from the beginning, as in Occupy, they quickly get outnumbered and demoralized by the apolitical rabble that magnetizes to such things. Their only choice is to leave, or, if they can, to run it into the ground so that everyone else jumps ship. Having observed any number of minor outbursts be suffocated in this way, the do-nothings tend to identify these specifically "radical" leftists as the pre-eminent threat when something does actually happen. As our friends point out, in reference to Monsieur Dupont's *Nihilist Communism*:

> The authors draw from the historical ultraleft a deep belief in political narratives of betrayal; they

Only then can we put our hands against the bare earth, feeling for the dim warmth of those fires still smoldering beneath.

Irrelevant

But what does this actually entail? Our friends lambast the do-nothings for, well, *doing nothing*, but, against this, we're obligated to pose that most nihilist of questions: what's the point? If all the do-nothings instead did something, what would/could/should they do? Again, there is no function to these prescriptive approaches, especially such hypothetical ones. More importantly, they construct a strange illusion in which doing *nothing* actually becomes possible, as if we all weren't already-embedded in the brutal expanse of this world—and therefore cannot really run from it when it breaks. Only leftists, as the hallowed guardians of politics and discourse, can actually believe that doing nothing is possible to begin with, because it is only they who are too busy with so-called "politics" to see what is accomplished in everyday life, or even what defines the balance of living itself—debt, disease, work, war. As communists, we simply cannot approach the question from this strange, extraterrestrial distance. Instead, we have to begin at the level of description, which is, after all, the executioner of "life-enhancing" fiction—as contemporary critics said of Dreiser: it "seems as though he learned English from a newspaper." Here, the question is again one of how people, ourselves included, are already responding to the nihilism of the era.

For some this nihilism is simply unacceptable. The leftist, therefore, will attempt every method to make the apolitical activity of the rioting youth somehow *communicable* to society. This either succeeds in suffocating the potentials in the riot by throwing its participants onto a familiar trajectory of activism, NGOs and Progressive political campaigns, or, more often, the leftists themselves are thrust aside, as in Hong Kong, where signs went up warning

With others, the critique grows harsher. The Naturalists' nihilism and their commitment to foregrounding the structuring principles of their characters' lives—whether biological, environmental or, behind it all, economic—combine into a sealed, deterministic vision of reality, in which all hope is lost and the fiefdoms of capital and genetics win out over all attempts to break them. At its harshest, this amounts to accusations of fascism. As Orwell said of London: "With his love of violence and physical strength, his belief in 'natural aristocracy', his animal-worship and exaltation of the primitive, he had in him what one might fairly call a Fascist strain." Doesn't this sound just a little too familiar?

Meanwhile, the Naturalist protagonist—particularly in Dreiser—bears a striking resemblance to Bartleby. Is not Clyde Griffiths, of Dreiser's *American Tragedy*, a sort of Bartleby stripped of his romantic ambiguity? Born into the slums, Clyde works and cheats his way up in Gilded Age America, ultimately becoming a factory overseer through simple nepotism. While at the factory, he falls in love with one of his employees, only to fall out of it once she is pregnant and he catches the eye of a daughter of the local bourgeoisie instead. The result is that he murders his pregnant girlfriend, gets caught, imprisoned and executed by the state. Rather than some vaguely idealistic refusal, Clyde's capitulation to his structuring environments—work, upbringing, the expectations of masculinity—ultimately result in a simple, downward arc of cowardice and petty greed. In each of his novels, Dreiser introduces the familiar narrative of the American Dream only to then subvert it, as each character's aspirations slowly putrefy over the course of their lives. The do-nothing of his protagonists is purely reactionary—and that is precisely the point.

Instead of a romanticized Bartleby—or his opposite: Horatio Alger—we get the cold, dull dissection of a moment in history, in which our protagonists seem to be little more than objects drawn to their own doom through social mechanisms as apparent and determinate as the pull of gravity. Whether destroyed by the ni-

hilist indifference of nature, as in London, or the cold, mechanical world of the industrial city, as in Crane and Dreiser, the Naturalist's Bartleby appears to simply be a specimen, and the authors themselves committed to little more than a melancholic bemoaning of their era's hopelessness.

But something is happening underneath the surface. Again, we find that our do-nothing, nihilist protagonists tend to crowd out the question of nihilism itself. By focusing on their dull, determined descent into vice, death or simple bourgeois boredom, we confuse the determinism imposed upon the characters by the social hierarchy with a determinism somehow inherent in the Naturalist universe, guaranteeing the social hierarchy itself. The hopelessness of the narrative is taken to be a grim political conclusion, rather than a simple descriptor of the era. But how, then, could Dreiser, London or Crane retain their avowedly *courageous* political views, even if attenuated by a certain pessimism? How could they see good ultimately winning out over evil if, in nearly every one of their stories, the result was so persistently the opposite?

Nihilism itself is the answer. The Dreiserian character is inactive not because s/he is nihilist, but precisely because s/he refuses to detach from the fleeting illusions of meaning constructed by capitalism. This inactivity is, in our friends' words, engagement "in a continuous process of emotional management – with images, with work, with sex, with commodities." Our friends' critique again holds true for the character, but not the bigger picture. Inactivity is not nihilism—its very desperation in naming itself such is the exact symptom of its falsehood. If there is any kind of nihilist *act*, it is the simple recognition that these processes of emotional management—the various ways in which meaning is structured *for us*—are not grounded in nature, history, god or genetics. This recognition is itself the necessary first step in any attempt "to think consciousness and activity together."

Crane summed up the sentiment more succinctly. En route to insurrectionary Cuba on the *SS Commodore*, laden with ammunition

It is a democratic illusion, however, to believe that the prominence of such groups somehow represents the beliefs of the people who compose these insurrectionary moments. Again, these people have been largely apolitical. This isn't to say that they don't have ideas about what is wrong, or demands about how to fix it—these exist in abundance. But these are for the most part weakly-thought positions, subordinate to lived experience and incapable, so far, of cohering into anything but the most vaguely populist statements. The problem here is *not* that different fractions of the proletariat engaged in these movements each brings its own different conception of what is wrong with the world and how it needs to be fixed. Even this consistency is lacking.

The problem goes deeper. There is no consistency between political positions—there is no *politics*—because the ground has not been cleared for it. Politics is not ideas in people's heads. It is the collision of these ideas with the forces aligned against peoples' lives. These ideas only evolve via their adaptation into *actions* in a continual process of combat against the present world. Without an agglomeration of such actions or any continuity of combat, people's positions can only be weakly held, and are easily superseded by those of whatever faction proves capable of effective gains without capitulation, even if only in the short term.

Organization is the name for this process, as these people confront and overcome the material limits constraining them in a given sequence of fights—specifically fights which are what we might call undomesticated, in the sense that they are not the "actions" or "community organizing" of the activist but instead activities that in some way tend toward insurrection and have at least a probability of escalating. Rather than organization, then, in the present we might simply speak of experimentation, as the willingness of small groups of people to gamble on these admittedly slim possibilities with absolutely no guarantee of success. The first act of navigation is to set foot in the wilderness.

from themselves. It is not coincidental that the insurrections in Egypt, Turkey and elsewhere were led, in tactical terms, not by leftists but by soccer hooligans. It is precisely because of this that we call these people *ultras*—our name for the segment of Generation Zero who have committed to grappling with the world around them.

Most are by no means communists. Many have at least remained apolitical, their lives dragging on as before but now with an extra bitterness. In this image the leftist can only see nihilism come as the wrecker of consciousness. But really it signals a new reflex, inarticulate, a muscle memory more than a consciousness—a hunger for it all to break again, like your body is building something powerful inside of you, preparing you for something you can't think or see until things shatter. Life at least shields most people from the left. We can neither "do nothing" nor "do politics" because we have to go to work tomorrow. Some are not so lucky, having since been drawn into an ambiguous dalliance with parliamentary politics, as in Greece and Spain, eating sugar to drown the bitterness. But it's still there, behind everything. Once it starts it can't be stopped, really, because the doom can't be stopped—this era is irreversible.

Others, faced with the frailty and patheticism of the left in both its institutional and anarchist forms, have begun a turn to the right. Reinventing the old tropes of reaction in a new language of "autonomy," they advocate a "third position" beholden, they say, to neither left nor right—transcending politics. Where these groups have gained prominence they have done so not via evangelism but through simple, practical action aimed at preserving the collective processes of which they were a part—Euromaidan, the Umbrella movement. They have built the barricades, patrolled them, provided food, gathered intel, built shields, helmets and molotovs, and, in general, led the tactical advances of the movement. The parliamentarians have played a similar, if more subdued, role in their own contexts.

and food for the insurgents, the steamship took on water off the coast of Florida and sank soon after. Stranded in a ten-foot dinghy with three other men, he spent a day and a half floating aimlessly, without food or water. The experience soon became one of his best known short stories, "The Open Boat." At first convinced of the ultimate hostility of the sea towards him and the other men, the story's narrator ultimately realizes that nature bears them no particular malice, but that this in and of itself may be more terrifying: "the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent." In a poem written sometime later, Crane would extend the metaphor to include the entire world, which "forever rudderless" made "quaint progress" and turned "as with serious purpose / Before stupid winds." This is the basic nihilist thesis.

Truth

But this thesis remains somewhat distant from politics. While it makes sense to take the *position* of nihilism as a philosopher, even the Naturalists stray from the term. Nihilism is an observed fact for them, not the name for any allegiance. It is simply the basis of the scientific approach to the world, which they sought to mimic in their fiction and which, for them, posed radical potentials for the emancipatory activity of human beings. Because once one accepts that there is no inherent moral logic to the universe and that nature is fundamentally indifferent, it follows that there are neither spiritual nor natural hierarchies built into the world—as much as they might disguise themselves in the language of genetics or providence, these are human constructs and can therefore be destroyed in kind.

But destruction is a physical act, not an existential one. Nothing is a pure execution of will. No matter how correct the ideas, the

skull can still be dashed against the hard surface of the Earth—and of course against the truncheons of the police. This is why, despite appearing Fascistic to the protein-starved vegans of the left, London's fascination with physical and mental strength is in fact his most communist dimension. London, like Dreiser and Crane, was a product of his era. He did not become a socialist through scholarship. Life in the canneries, mills and mines of turn-of-the-century America was enough of a lesson in capitalism, as well as a lesson in how difficult it would be to overturn. Against the bellowing myths of Protestant self-help, race war, or progressive techno-salvation, the nihilist thesis alone made real sense of this world. By recognizing that weakness was not preordained—at the level of individual as much as class—London realized that strength was not something one simply had, but something that one *made*.

Physical strength is the most visceral realization of this—the fact that one can build one's body into a weapon, that one can make oneself harder to kill—but the same applies for mental acumen. Individually, London saw this as a certain strengthening of the will. For Crane, it went under the name courage, taking on something of a collective aspect since wars are fought *together*, after all. For all of the Naturalists, however, *science* became the most apt designator for the type of collective mental strength that might flow from the realization that the moral order of the universe was built in sand but remained resilient nonetheless, constantly reinforced by those who benefited from it. Their inquiries into Darwinism, early genetics and the structuring principles of the non-human environment were not, then, declarations of dry determinism so much as attempts to understand the deeply *contingent* terrain on which they operated—to find some tool that could help them systematically shed the "meaning" constructed for them by the enemy, and instead drive down toward some sort of truth capable of burning that moral order to the ground.

Nihilism and truth here coincide in what appears to be the most obvious contradiction of terms. Many balk at this sort of

and inheritance. Past defeats found the present like fossil-scattered sediments, suffocating potentials before they begin because they have been adapted to, accommodated, bought-off or stomped-out before. Capitalism raises bumper-crops of starry-eyed anarchists, each of whom believes he has some world-breaking *new idea*, only to be harvested later, the grist for a new tech boom or colonization protocol. Our idea, by contrast, is nothing new. It is a dull, old dream, weighted with a miserable history. A lost cause. Nothing to get excited about. In fact, this is one of the few ways you can figure out who to trust around here: Never trust the excited. Communism is and should be a buzzkill.

There is no illumination, no sublime, no engineer, plan-in-hand, lighting our path. There is no "knowledge" in the false, clinical sense enshrined by our forebears. We must make our way forward into that dark wilderness guided only by the dim pattern of constellations and the silhouettes of distant ridgelines. Some light is cast forward by the fires of history, but our own bodies obscure it, cutting broad silhouettes ahead of us filled only with starlight. Instead of knowledge we have intuition. The communist procedure in the present, then, is a sort of grappling with the world. Blind, we must feel out its contours, find its strengths, its joints, its veins and airways. This is the close, bloody contact of ground-fighting, not some *deus ex anarcha* of the one-shot knockout. The process begins, of necessity, in our present weakness. Over time, we make strength.

In Year Zero, those who we call Generation Zero—our own fucked generation—are the seemingly apolitical re-emergence of politics proper, the time-sequenced reconstitution of the proletariat but now largely minus its peasant lineage, a properly orphaned proletariat. It is in this apparently apolitical—this *nihilistic*—atmosphere that we, a handful of young communists, already exist and can already intervene. Contra our friends, then, we think that you must look for nihilism not in "nihilists," but in Baltimore, where youth slash the fire hoses sent to "save" them

But a strange, almost disgusting type of understanding infects those of us who see the present as something perched on the edge of an abyss. Whether we like it or not, to be a communist today requires the recognition of that same fundamental contingency so feared by the adherents of the tweaker-sublime. Despite the abhorrent character of this kinship, we share with these people the blood the era. The key difference is that the communist cannot attempt to reconstruct a new regime of morality or meaning out of the leftover husks ripped from capital's junkyards. To do so would only be to build another "cult of grandiose suicide," in Cassuere's words—this one just slightly redder than its counterparts.

Starlight

Instead, the communist act is one that simply opens its eyes to the doom behind the mirage. This leads us to our fourth, and final, hypothesis: **We must proceed by dead reckoning**. There is no longer any "road to socialism." Some among us seem only capable of peering backwards, arguing via shoddy historical analogy that the road can be rebuilt, that it is only a matter of doing *what they did then*. In effect, this amounts to the belief that the road is really there already, placed for us as by the providence of history, and we only need some ritual repetition of the past—this is what LARPing amounts to, after all—for it to be illuminated. This mode of thinking is leftism, boiled down to its core. And we simply should not trouble ourselves with these people. The leftists, firmly believing that they see a road ahead of themselves, are bound to trace out the dim, circuitous outline of some deer trail leading in no particular direction and ending maybe in a low warren where animals sleep and gnaw at dried bones.

There is no providence hidden in history. Instead, the forward momentum of capitalism is fundamentally contingent, even if this contingency is structured by what came before. There is only force

inconsistency—"you aren't really talking about *nihilism*, then"—and by all means they can flood onto the internet forums to complain about how the last episode of the first season of *True Detective* pretty much ruined everything. In reality, this apparent inconsistency is a product of certain partisan battles taking place deep within the guts of philosophy. As Ray Brassier, one of today's best-(which is to say not-very-well)-known nihilist philosophers explains:

> Like Nietzsche, I think nihilism is a consequence of the 'will to truth'. But unlike Nietzsche, I do not think nihilism culminates in the claim that there is no truth. Nietzsche conflated truth with meaning, and concluded that since the latter is always a result of human artifice, the former is nothing but a matter of convention. However, once truth is dismissed, all that remains is the difference between empowering and disempowering fictions, where 'life' is the fundamental source of empowerment and the ultimate arbiter of the difference between life-enhancing and life-depreciating fictions. Since the abandonment of truth undermines the reason for relinquishing illusion, it ends up licensing the concoction of further fictional narratives, the only requirement for which is that they prove to be 'life-enhancing'.
>
> I consider myself a nihilist precisely to the extent that I refuse this Nietzschean solution and continue to believe in the difference between truth and falsity, reality and appearance. In other words, I am a nihilist precisely because I still believe in truth, unlike those whose triumph over nihilism is won at the cost of sacrificing truth. I think that it is possible to *understand* the meaninglessness of existence, and that this capacity to understand meaning as a regional or *bounded*

> phenomenon marks a fundamental progress in cognition.

If London seems to partially accept the Nietzschean, "life-enhancing," solution, it is at least alloyed with this more Naturalist counterpart. Strength is not strength for its own sake, but strength built in the name of a purely negative science. Truth is the act of scouring "meaning" from our world, ungrounding its hierarchies by ungrounding their appeal to nature, providence or, in the last instance, simple Nietzschean strength. Power, stripped of more substantial supports, is perfectly capable of maintaining its fiefdoms in the simple name of affirming life—and this is precisely how current logics of warfare function, "supply chain security" tasked not with some grand political project *a la* the "Free World" of the Cold War but instead with the basic, violent maintenance of supply systems that "we all depend upon," as the counter-insurgent think-tanks so adamantly insist. Underneath the mercenary's Nietzschean silhouette, then, there always hides a secret affirmation: life against death. As every soldier knows, defense of the supply chain is defense of life, at least. Without it we have nothing but extinction, entropy—that ancient middle desert where civilization began its earth-rending and where the wars of our era have now so tiringly accumulated, as if devastation magnetizes to itself. Buried in this affirmation of life, of course, is the affirmation of this desert itself, an affirmation of the present apportionment of weakness and strength.

A communist nihilism must obviously distinguish itself from a mercenary one. For us, doom goes all the way down. Truth is the name for plummeting toward it. Even life is no guarantee—because this simple utilitarian logic is itself the founding myth of capitalism, which enshrines labor-in-the-abstract, deifying life through the ritual of the wage with its thinly-veiled threat: you need us if you want to live. Truth is the name for rejecting even this gambit. Ours is not a project of wild, uncontrollable life somehow overflowing

into nihilism as the structuring principle of the era, rather than as a position that some hold, while others don't.

Abe Cabrera's article on "recent developments in eco-extremist thought in Mexico," for example, explores the resurgence of eco-terrorism not as some fluke of over-enthusiasm on the part of a handful of radicals, but instead as an historical product of the conjunction between Mexico's centuries-old project of colonization and the dire conditions of our present ecological crisis, against which there has been an almost complete lack of action—with even the anti-industrial revolution prophesied by Kaczynski failing to materialize. Critics of the article took it as all too sympathetic to groups like Reacción Salvaje—who are, let's not mince words: lunatics. But this criticism completely ignores the crucial difference between understanding—or even a sort of perverted sympathy—and *endorsement*.

The same was leveled at Jean Cassuere's article on foreign recruits to ISIS, despite its insight into the underlying magnetism of these phenomena for those who come face to face with hopelessness:

> […] it is not the actual *ummah* that those foreign fighters go off to die for. It is the distant mirage of the coming Caliphate, the establishment of the *true ummah*. It is that fever dream of dying a martyr in the service of a perfect community (because it is, as of yet, a non-existent community, though one already pregnant with the meaning bestowed upon it precisely because of this mountain of sacrifice) of which one can only get a glimpse in this world through the lens of the companionship of the jihadi brethren and that paradise to be found in the shade of swords.

To anyone with faith in any given moral order, socialist or otherwise, the actions of such individuals can only appear inscrutable.

Kaczynski or his younger Mexican counterparts: Reacción Salvaje—excavates the mythic ruins of some lost Wild so that he might act as its bearded messenger, mostly by attempting to send mail-bombs to scientists.

Despite their initial appearance, or even their own claims to the contrary, it is simply incorrect to call any of these positions nihilist. All are explicitly yoked to a suffocating, monstrous sublime—they are desperate attempts to *deny* the nihilism of our era via the resurrection of a mythic past or the invocation of some salvific sign, a kingdom-come that requires complete commitment by its few miserable, elite adherents if it is to come at all. In fact, it is this commitment alone that gives the activity *meaning*, at last. When the resource is scarce, it takes the most extreme effort to extract it. Even if they die it is, after all, a *sacrifice*.

Whether or not we like it this is Year Zero: not really a term of endearment, but instead a signifier for our brutal nearness to extinction. This is something that we didn't and cannot "choose" other than choosing to simply *recognize* that we are here. It is an environment constructed around us, structured by the constant, low-level violence that is the economy. Year Zero, then, designates our era not despite but because of its ability to haul up corpses—the Khmer Rouge, epitome of the ruthless preservation of the present world in the name of a salvific Kingdom-come. Not a clean slate or a new beginning, it is instead the name for being crushed to death under constantly accumulating rubble.

Today, only the remaining disciples of Camatte seem to have seen this, at least in part—for some reason we always imagine them as brown-robed monks shuffling facelessly between temple-caves hewn from the cold stone of some ancient, inaccessible mountain range. Still, they have a website: *Ritual*, emblazoned with one of Camatte's better lines: "The human being is dead and is no more than a ritual of capital." As the quote might suggest, their publication details some of the darkest aspects of the present, inquiring

ing its management. Nor is it a project death, which is, of course, what lies on the other side of that supply chain stretched through the desert—death as the religion of those same mercenaries, grown disillusioned with the more rudimentary myths of their profession. Ours is a simple, mechanical science, aimed at the meticulous destruction of this world's very framework of life-making and death-giving. Truth can only be believed in *because* one is a nihilist, and a communist project can be constructed in fidelity to truth via a scientific interrogation of the conditions of the world around us—the human and non-human technologies which compose it—and through the courageous, collective will to insurrection against this world.

Rituals

This may make a certain degree of sense at the level of philosophy, but how does one ground any sort of nihilism in the present *political* conjuncture? In what follows we will put forward several positions. These will be stated as clear-cut hypotheses, points of contention, maybe, but also starting-points for our own process of inquiry. This will allow us to shed literary ambiguities and make a few sparse claims, capable of being defended against our friends and enemies alike.

Our first hypothesis is simple: **outside of philosophy, it makes little sense to call oneself a "nihilist."** There is no political content in the statement, and, as our friends have so extensively shown, self-designating in this way more often seems to signal the exact opposite—as well as just a general dickishness. There is a silly futility to most of these people. They lambast others for using narratives and concepts that have a certain heritage in previous regimes of meaning, whether religious or political, as if people don't readily know that these things come with such baggage—that revolution, for example, has millenarian overtones.

The ultimate image is humorous. The baby-faced nihilist jumps up in the middle of the play to declare to the audience: my god, you all have to stop watching, the people up there are pretending to be people they aren't, the backdrop is painted on, it's all *fake*! What can we say to these baby-faces, once their vitriol calms and they sit back down, nervous, infuriated, but too tired to scream at us anymore? Maybe just that eternal condolence: Sorry bro.

Our second hypothesis, however, conditions the first: **nihilism inheres in the era. It is a product of history**. This is why it cannot be "chosen" as one out of an array of political positions, but instead must simply be seen. As Brassier explains:

> Very simply, nihilism is a crisis of meaning. This crisis is historically conditioned, because what we understand by 'meaning' is historically conditioned. We've moved from a situation in which the phenomenon of 'meaning' was self-evident to one in which it has become an enigma, and a primary focus of philosophical investigation.

Though he is here speaking of science and philosophy, we can transpose the same logic to our present political terrain. The meaning constructed by the old social democracies and Keynesian welfare states is long dead. But even their rejuvenated, right-wing inheritors are slowly starving to death. Neither the laissez-faire "California Ideology" of Silicon Valley nor the social-conservative resurgence of the Bible Belt can any longer lay claim to a genuine mass appeal. Theses moral regimes developed in response to particular crises of capital, but they have grown obsolete, outcompeted by the degenerating dynamics at the very heart of the economic order they were adapted to enforce.

Continuing attempts to render the last seven years of economic stagnation and periodic insurrection within these neat narratives of self-help and moral decay has only hollowed them out. Ideology has instead fragmented into an archipelago of glowing screens,

where liberal white baby boomers can still consume their steady diet of mortgage-funded Bob Dylan albums and Warren Buffet biographies, while a new, smaller fraction of rich millenials can pour their faith into organic farming, social media or the literal *deus ex machina* of solar panels and 3D printing. Ideology is now a niche market, cultivated to its consumers. In one sense this makes it far more effective, but it's also expensive. Most of us simply can't afford it anymore. In its place, we get the self-aware apocalypse: The Donald Trump Effect. *The Walking Dead* as our last mass ritual.

But this is not a simple issue of ideological maintenance. Nor is our era alone. Previous periods have witnessed just such a collapse of the moral regime, accompanied by world-rending acts of violence which cast hope out the window even as they opened vast potentials for revolution. It is not coincidental that a similar nihilism—a political fact, as much as a scientific one—preceded and underpinned the major revolutionary efforts of Eurasia in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often fused to a peasant millenarianism. Nihilism returns today under similar conditions, but instead of folk-religious prophecies of doom, we have the real thing. Nihilism exists whether we like it or not in our own nearness to oblivion—as much in ecological catastrophe as in the obliterating advance of the material community of capital, which pieces apart every integument of our lives like a fracking rig shattering the very earth to suck out its black marrow. We are nihilists regardless of whether we call ourselves by the name, because we have no road out of this. We have only the starlit wilderness.

One result of this is **the rise of the tweaker-sublime**, our third hypothesis. In an era when meaninglessness is a banality, desperate individuals seize onto fragments of meaning and construct out of them hypertrophied monstrosities. The tweaker carefully collects the pieces of 1968's psycho-sexual evangel, melting them down to the purest accelerant. The fundamentalist—white-bread American protestant or ISIS militant—grabs shards of left-over religion, still sharp enough to draw blood. The eco-terrorist—