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What the Age Demanded: Power and Resistance in Premodern and Postmodern Texts

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Abstract

Linkages exist between premodern and postmodern texts in such areas as the construction and maintenance of power, as well as in the varieties of resistant experience. Power is something that we all participate in—primarily through what we know, wherein knowledge equals praxis. If knowledge is something we do, then our choices about what we know can be places of resistance. Premodern examples of such resistance can be found in St. Augustine, the desert fathers, the mystics and the “little saints” of Aquitaine. Are these examples so different from postmodernists? Anarchy is not advocated, but an awareness of the constructs of power that we encounter not just in the academy but also in every day life. We live in an age that demands “a mould in plaster,” where reality equals reality TV. Yet pockets of resistance “punctually come forever and ever.”

The age demanded an image
Of its accelerated grimace,
Something for the modern stage,
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace;

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries
Of the inward gaze;
Better mendacities,
Than the classics in paraphrase!

The “age demanded” chiefly a mould in plaster,
Made with no loss of time,
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster
Or the “sculpture” of rhyme.

Ezra Pound
“Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”¹

Postmodernism concerns itself with
presentation. Rather than allowing one privileged
method, one essential form, a “consensus of taste”

¹ “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley II” by Ezra Pound, from PERSONAE, © 1926 by Ezra Pound. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

which would make possible the ability to “share collectively,” postmodernism works without rigid structures. The process of presentation then permits new structures, new rules that are created by virtue of having been created.² A departure perhaps, certainly the presentation becomes something open ended. Stripping away layers of form, we see these departures as constant resistance to hegemonic discourse, hegemonic power. Tellingly, a common reaction to the philosophical ideas of postmodernism is also one of resistance, a reluctance to impart any value to such ideas. Charges of impracticality, meaninglessness, or dismissing postmodernism as some kind of linguistic game that does not matter in the “real world” are often noted.³ Where does this resistance come from? Do those who resist fear what might happen if essentialisms are deconstructed? In the very short memories of the contemporary age, we quickly forget that such absolutist ways of thinking are products of modernity.

The premodern Western world, while informed by Christianity and therefore married to religious thought (and the essentialist language and constructs that go along with this belief system), does hold linkages with postmodern ways of thinking. Such linkages only become more visible as scholars increasingly attempt to use postmodern “tools” to gain new understandings of older texts. Far from being “ideologically driven”⁴—trying to force premodern texts into postmodern constraints (an oxymoron)—a natural flow and fit exist between these temporal periods. Teasing

² The quoted material is based on the work of Jean Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984) as quoted in Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), xv-xvi.

³ For a concise argument against postmodernism, specifically with regard to the field of history, see Peter Zogorin, “History, the Referent and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now,” *History and Theory* 38:1 (February 1999), 1–24.

⁴ Philipp W. Rosemann, *Understanding Scholastic Thought with Foucault* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), iix.

out linkages among constructs of power, language, and resistance allows for new ways of considering these concepts and constructs, not only as historians or “scholars,” but also as people. Theoretical work, yet not necessarily impractical: perhaps this is what our age demands. Instead of contenting ourselves with an image of what is real, we expose ourselves to what is underneath that facade; we break the “mould in plaster” which constricts us. We learn to resist order, and let disorder be. This is not “scholarship for scholarship’s sake,” but a type of exercise which salvages what enlightened modernity would ignore: a “darkened” past that needs to be explored (to continue the quest metaphor) to allow us a keener sense of how we got to who we are.

These linkages appear in various constructs—most notably for this paper, the construct of power. I do not consider power a fixed attribute, capable of being attained, but a place of inconstancy. Michel Foucault’s explication speaks to this; rather than allowing power to be an external monolith against which individuals have little or no effect (unless they are “in positions of power,” a paradigm that supposedly allows one access to “control”⁵), he exposes power as omnipresent and inescapable. Power informs all social reality and relationships: we all contribute and partake in power creation.⁶ The relationality and interactivity of power makes it something dynamic and thus mutable. In this sense, then, far different from that external force, power pushes from within.⁷ The concept of power is typically seen as a disturbing one, with an assumption that the wielding of power always results in negative effects.⁸ As an

⁵ The concept of power as an attribute is troubling, not just in how it necessitates a hierarchical world, but also in how it introduces a controlling aspect to alterity; relations with others become fraught with struggles over “who wields the power.” In my understanding, as informed by Michel Foucault, even in relationships where one party supposedly has more power, and can therefore “control” the other, both parties contribute equally to the creation of the power construct. In addition, the one who supposedly has no power might very well be wielding a type of passive or manipulative power, less conspicuous but no less potent.

⁶ J. Joyce Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine: Reconsidering Power and Love* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2003), 14.

⁷ Schuld, 18.

⁸ Foucault would have us consider instead the creative and constructive aspects of power. See Schuld, 24.

alternative approach, consider that power does not make things bad; it makes things dangerous.⁹ The danger lies in a variety of places: power becomes dangerous when wielded selfishly or, perhaps more so, when wielded unwittingly.

Since power is relational, the place of the Other cannot be neglected. Language and institutions are two primary nodes where interactions with others occur, and as such, are extremely useful in examining the relationality of power. Looking to J. Joyce Schuld’s explication and synthesis of the works of St. Augustine and Michel Foucault in both language (specifically rhetoric) and institutionalism will allow us to uncover some instances of the creation of power, and its effect on alterity.

Because of its multifaceted rather than comprehensive nature, resisting power does not require a colossal undertaking; it can be done on smaller levels, in smaller arenas, in smaller ways. Being aware of the ways in which we all participate in power relations then becomes of paramount importance. In addition, we need to be able to step back and be aware of ourselves within the matrix of power relations. If we regard it, in Foucault’s terms, as “a machine in which everyone is caught...an invention that even its inventor is incapable of controlling,”¹⁰ we only reiterate feelings of powerlessness, which misses the point. As Foucault explains, he is here speaking of the “vertiginous sense” of such a construct, but on closer and more considered thought the vertigo disappears. Awareness of everyone’s participatory roles in the creation of power then results not in “an absence of moral responsibility but rather a complicated sense of communal and individual responsibility that are elaborately interwoven.”¹¹ We all equally are able to resist power.¹²

We find a place of resistance, congruously, in language. Language, the medium by which we all interpret the world, has been used to create and uphold constructs of power. Therefore, to co-opt language as one place to resist these constructs is an intentional step. Awareness of language becomes the strand of commonality running between postmodern and pre-modern texts. The deliberate use of arcane language by postmodernists daunts many who would attempt to familiarize themselves with postmodern concepts. However, it is deliberate, and as such, has meaning. In part, postmodernists apologize for the dense language

⁹ Schuld, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, 67.

by touting it as the result of an attempt to express something inexpressible, or a necessary technique used to subvert reason.¹³ These cursory explanations, while important, can be fleshed out by harking back to Christ's use of parables—something he did deliberately to exclude those who heard him from understanding his message, or to differentiate between those who were willing to choose to understand, and those who were not.¹⁴

While this concept of arcane language fits well with premodern religious traditions, many postmodernists would hesitate to align themselves with Christ or any Christian tradition, for fear of becoming entangled with notions of essentialism. However, parallels can be drawn between the two if they are confined to intellectual rather than religious traditions. The desert fathers approached language with great care; they were especially aware of the serious weight of language, and did not advocate frivolous speech.¹⁵ While Christ may not have been concerned with frivolous speech per se, the gospel passages do speak to the conscious use of arcane narratives and obscure sayings. Such deliberation is also evident in the ontological argument of Saint Anselm, who shows his awareness of the limits and fallibilities of language to express God.¹⁶ This same sense of fallibility comes out in mystical writings, which, as explicated by Michel de Certeau, use language in much the same way as Hieronymus Bosch used figures: using a familiar system to attempt the representation of something we have never seen or heard before. There are different elements in each instance of abstruse language, both premodern and postmodern, yet they are held together by strands of resistance. If language is acknowledged as limited, then such obscure writing must be approached with a willingness to work for comprehension. Reason and logic alone will not help; there must be a willingness to suspend reason, (perhaps) to discover a personal connection with the language. This arcane language necessitates a time-consuming process for

comprehension to flourish and many revolt against such a lengthy business, unwilling to take the time to explore and allow understanding to emerge. Modernity taught us to be efficient, something which pre- and postmodernism does not value as highly.

Arcane language positions its users on the margins, quite often by choice. More than a linguistic device or literary construct, or even part of a postmodern theory, the margins have a location, an active quality to them quite outside the realm of language. The process by which a life is lived can be a place of resistance. Life “as a work of art”; something which allows “personal flourishing.”¹⁷ Some choose to live in this manner, the desert fathers, for example. Or perhaps we can look to other “emptied selves”—Michel De Certeau's idiot woman, or Surin's “Enlightened Illiterate.” Wildmen, or nomads, as De Certeau calls them, fit into this category. Others are pushed into the margins by the institution of which they are a part, as was the experience of the “little saints” of Aquitaine. What these beings have in common, aside from the non-nomological character of their existence, is the way they all create a place of resistance. They create it with their very lives, subverting reason through their choices, or through their experience. Humility marks this existence, through the emptying of their selves, which seems, paradoxically, to imbue them with a marked transformative power. The effect of these lives on those who witness their example is telling.

Constructing Power

In ways unique to each of them, Michel Foucault and Saint Augustine both challenge privileged discourses of their respective times, discourses that contributed to the construction of power. Since they are privileged discourses, they operate on a cultural or state level. Relationality persists here, as rhetoric can speak to the relation between one state and another or the relation between members of the same state. Augustine engages the former type of rhetoric, while Foucault attempts to deconstruct the latter. The common theme of both is a striving for certainty and perfection. The danger lies in the obscuration of rhetoric in “noble-sounding endeavours” of improvement.¹⁸ Attempts to better the world are uncovered as proud beliefs in one's own perspective as free of selfishness and therefore unhindered in applicability. “Hopeful acts of arrogance,” Schuld calls

¹³ Wyschogrod, 233

¹⁴ Matthew 13.11–15, Mark 4.11–12, Luke 8.10.

¹⁵ Douglas Burton Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 3.

¹⁶ St. Anselm, “Proslogion,” in *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986), 239–244.

¹⁷ Schuld, 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

them.¹⁹

Where can we find hope in what Schuld calls “the rhetoric of glory?” This rhetoric exaggerates the differences between the “enemy/them” and “us/the defenders-of-whatever-may-be-threatened-by-the-enemy.”²⁰ Maintaining such difference allows orators to dull the plight of any victims of their policies. Atrocities are justified with the rhetoric of glory and listeners participate by allowing themselves to believe this demonizing of the “enemy” (it matters not if the enemy changes). We can allow no hope for the Other in such a relationship; all hope must be placed in the destruction of the enemy, in order to make the world safer. Perhaps some altruism exists for the state subscribing to such rhetoric if it believes it acts in the best interests of other states in addition to itself. Whether such actions are asked for or condoned by those other states does not matter. The only relevance given is to the destruction of the enemy at all costs.

The “just war” best exemplifies this type of discourse: a war in defence of one’s country in the face of an unprovoked attack, or a war to prevent such an attack in the future. The first critique stems from the “seductively simplistic terms” such wars are couched in: right and wrong, good and evil, terms which ignore the moral ambiguities of this kind of act. As Schuld puts it, “aggressive actions, precisely because they are aggressive, can never be completely free of the moral transgressions that they are supposed to eliminate.”²¹ At best, such acts are performed with the actors unconscious of the powerful damage they wield upon the Other. At worst, the actors become enamoured with the concept of glory, and become blindly tyrannical. A mentality of knowing what is best for other states sets in, and the original motive (to bring peace) vanishes. Those who are subject to such acts do not respond in gratitude, much to the bafflement of the acting state, but become resentful, and perhaps respond with sporadic and vicious attacks on their so-called saviours.²²

Augustine likens such kingdoms²³ to “gangs of

criminals on a large scale,” especially once questioners remove the concept of “justice.”²⁴ This, however, begs the question: who or what determines the meaning of justice? A “just” thing for one state is “unjust” for another. This deconstructs the whole concept of a “just war” as such a thing cannot exist outside of the realm of rhetoric.

Augustine was speaking of the wars of Rome and the desire for conquest that drove the Roman Empire. He strips the “rhetoric of glory” to show its inherent deceptiveness in that it covers up “bare violence with the dazzling splendour of victory.”²⁵ It is somewhat alarming to read Augustine’s view of this rhetoric, and realize how similar it sounds to a great deal of the rhetoric that North America and Western Europe use today to talk about the Muslim world. The idea of achieving peace through violence has currency even today, allowing us a particular view of one sadly distinct and seemingly inescapable linkage between the pre-modern and the postmodern world.

Equally inescapable is the rhetoric Michel Foucault attacks—what Schuld calls the rhetoric of progress. The rhetoric relies on objectivity, not glory, for its privilege.²⁶ Who, steeped in a modern mindset, can dispute objectivity? “The facts speak for themselves” is today a buzz phrase difficult for many to counter. As Schuld explains, such rhetoric is “shielded by [its] purported lack of any biasing conviction or agenda, [its] ‘scientized’ canon of norms, and [its] pseudo-medical technologies and regimens.”²⁷ For Foucault, such a position, both to speak from, and from which to be spoken to, is especially dangerous because of the unobtrusiveness of the coercion.²⁸ “Progressive” technologies like Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon exemplify this: not only would it restrain and control a population, but it also is lauded for “maximizing the potential serviceability of each individual,”²⁹ as though serviceability were a measurable commodity. This ideology stems from the modern desire to bring order to disorder, an enterprise with an inherent danger. We see here the same danger that Augustine encountered in the rhetoric of glory, that is, the dulling of human feelings. Foucault goes further, by examining penal systems, and especially capital punishment.³⁰ Those who would witness an execution find themselves

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 165.

²¹ Ibid., 163. The exception for Augustine, Schuld notes, are wars sanctioned by God, such as those recounted in the *Old Testament*.

²² Ibid., 165.

²³ The term may be anachronistic to use today, but the concept is timely.

²⁴ Schuld, 165.

²⁵ Ibid., 165.

²⁶ Ibid., 181.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 192.

³⁰ Ibid., 203.

witnessing people going about their daily jobs—that it could be someone’s job to take life; that such an occupation could seem normal, necessary, is at the very least, chilling.

Couching such enterprises in the language of science, of the law courts, of medicine, lessens the weight of the decisions made by those who determine the fate of others (criminals or the mentally ill). The same can be said of military language, which terms innocent civilian bloodshed as “collateral damage,” a meaningless, ambiguous non-phrase, and calls an attack on the enemy a “surgical strike,” as if it was a necessary pain to ensure the health of a “body.”³¹ The supposed objectivity and neutrality of those making these decisions, those speaking such language, allows them to do just that with very little reaction from those who are witnesses. Foucault shows us that the attempt to “clean up the streets, restore order, mop up the ‘mad’” does as much harm as good, but the harm is “papered over,” things must be kept “tidy.”³²

As an example of just such an attempt to impose order on disorder, Schuld turns to Foucault’s work on the plague-ridden seventeenth-century town.³³ She explains that Foucault does not take exception to the controlling efforts to save lives, but the unintentional result of those efforts—the realization, fleetingly, of “a “disciplined society” free of “rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder.”³⁴ This creation of a “social grid” on which citizens are fixed (and fix themselves) determines and internalizes a very controlled sense of self-awareness and awareness of the Other, which complicates relationship for Foucault.³⁵ We thus inform relationship with a dread of disorder and an abhorrence of diversity. Eccentricity, even individuality, becomes deviant.

I would argue that this same mentality can be found not only in prison systems and plague-struck French towns, but also in many other forms of modern life. Let us take the imposing of order on time as one such example. Modern life is

increasingly dictated by temporal routine, hours parceled out in small doses, “measuring out one’s life with coffee spoons.” As this happens, it grows harder not to succumb to what M. B. Pranger calls “death in the afternoon.”³⁶ Perhaps this death is a natural response to the creation of unnatural order in life. It became a space in which medieval monks struggled tremendously, seeking to experience unceasing ecstatic joy in “the treadmill of meditation and reading,” an unnatural and impossible task.³⁷ Perhaps we struggle less today, however, and more readily succumb to the death, allowing it to wash over us.³⁸

For a concrete example, we can look to a university, where members attempt to be in class on time and get restless after fifty or eighty minutes, knowing well when a lecture is scheduled to end. The workplace gives another example: the day broken up into routine activities, punctuated by small amounts of “free” time. Even our entertainment is meted out in doses: movies, symphonies, plays, and TV programs—all assigned specific time slots around which we negotiate. I am not advocating anarchy, but I am advocating awareness, as are Foucault and Augustine. They both see a need to “jar citizens out of apathy . . . to incite them to remain critical of the status quo.”³⁹ This would apply to their own work as well. Although Augustine criticizes the Roman Empire and its devices to impose order, he, or Schuld, allows it as something necessary to maintain a “peaceful existence in the city.”⁴⁰ A necessary evil (I do not use the term ironically), resulting from humanity’s fall into sin, and therefore something inescapable for members of any society. Foucault does not share Augustine’s metaphysical analysis, nor does he provide any enclosed alternative to these social institutions. He cannot, for he does not speak from a set of “foundationalist norms.”⁴¹ He offers instead an “ad hoc critical enterprise” which allows for open-ended readings of society, of history, of the world.⁴² This diversity is beneficial in that responses will then

³¹ The language of today’s advertising industry follows a similar pattern, as words calculated to make the listener feel a lack and the promise of amelioration of such a lack with the purchase of the product.

³² Schuld, 205

³³ *Ibid.*, 182.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁶ M. B. Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity: Essays on the Poetics of Monasticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 4–5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5. Ecstasy and joy are not unobtainable, but the experience can never be unceasing.

³⁸ Edith Wyschogrod comments on this issue in a slightly different context—that of the banality of death in today’s “information” age, where we are daily bombarded with the sights and news of death, so much so that it becomes meaningless. See *Saints and Postmodernism*, xiv.

³⁹ Schuld, 205.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴² *Ibid.*

be richer, and possibly more creative.⁴³ In many ways, these responses can be read as resistances. Since we have looked at some cases of how language creates power, we continue in that vein and look to language as a place of resistance.

Language as Resistance

Resistance requires a conscious decision; awareness of the structures of hegemony as outlined by Augustine and Foucault is not enough to ensure resistance. The forms which this resistance takes vary, which fits with Foucault's desire for rich, creative responses. Perhaps an aesthetic ideal is achieved, life as a "work of art." The process matters more than the result, and the process leaves us not free from all control, but rather able to perceive and thus determine the kind of controls that govern us and how these will affect our intersections with others.⁴⁴ In this process, knowledge becomes an act, not something we "have" but something we "do," and therefore never neutral.⁴⁵

Knowledge, then, also becomes a choice, a decision. More than something to be swallowed and assimilated, we participate in what we come to know. As much as we help to shape the power delineations of relationship in our lives, we also shape the knowledge that aids us in constructing those very relationships, our own sense of self, our own reality. This choice can be as simple as not choosing in the sense that a person could refuse a position of reflection, could adhere to and never question the hegemony of the cultural discourses with which each of us are daily confronted.

Not surprisingly, one place where renegade choices evince themselves is in religious spaces. Monks and mystics: both are on the margins, living in enclosed physical spaces or solitary spiritual spaces, wrestling with language.⁴⁶ As examples of these types, we look to explication of the hermeneutics of the desert fathers by Douglas Burton-Christie, and to Michel De Certeau's work on mystical language.

The desert fathers are highly sensitive to the importance of language, and use it deliberately in a variety of ways: narratives, question and answer, riddles and even silence. Burton-Christie, informed by Paul Ricoeur's theories of language, examines the interaction of the monks with their texts, displaying again a linkage between premodern and postmodern texts.⁴⁷ Ricoeur speaks of the interpretive process of communication (what I would call a decisive approach to knowledge) in terms of "word events": "language set[ting] something in motion [and] . . . [thus] existence is illumined."⁴⁸ For the desert fathers, a "word event" not only means pondering the Word of God, but also the words of their elders, and these word events have the power to transform lives.⁴⁹ It happens in what Ricoeur calls the "dialectic of event and meaning," where participation in the process of understanding allows the text to "project a world," and the "challenge of interpretation is . . . to engage that . . . world."⁵⁰ This evokes Foucault's open-ended readings of the world, as each text has the capacity to unfold in continuously new possibilities of meaning, depending on how each is interpreted. It might be helpful to think of this, as Burton-Christie does, as a conversation with a text.⁵¹ Varied questions and answers mean that for each individual, one text can develop into different conversations, depending on when and where and how the conversation takes place. "In this model," says Burton-Christie, "neither the text nor the interpreter is a static object."⁵² Lives are transformed through this model because of this act, not simply because we interpret the text in a certain way, but also because the text interprets us, allowing for reciprocal agency.

The weight of such a concept of language bears down on those who approach it, ensuring a deliberation and carefulness to their conversations. Especially for those who, like the desert fathers and those who sought their counsel, believe that these are words of salvation. Words here were never uttered without the awareness that they were meant to be "taken up and integrated into the hearts, minds, and actions of those who received them."⁵³ In addition to this salvific attribute of language, the desert fathers realized the power of words to wound, destroy or condemn.⁵⁴ Burton-

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁶ I use the word solitary deliberately; mystics, as will be discussed later, are often frustrated by the limitations of language. Yet they persist in the attempt, which I believe speaks to a desire to be understood, to share their unique experiences.

⁴⁷ Burton-Christie, 18–23.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 22

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 134. Though Burton-Christie does not use the term

Christie exposes a tense ambivalence towards language on the part of the desert fathers, and the need to “test” all the participants of a speech event: the word, the participant who speaks it, and the one who hears it. The struggle to control the tongue, to guard well what issues from the mouth was part of the lifelong journey these monks were taking. The elders, it appears, had less trouble than the younger monks did. Through the process of living a life of close and transformative interaction with language, they were purified of selfish motivations and desires.⁵⁵ Control over language was possible, as long as one worked at it. Another place to make a decision, then, for in order to subvert “worldly words” a monk needed to turn his or her heart towards God, and the words would be rendered impotent.⁵⁶ A result of this life long quest which transformed the elders was awareness of this “reciprocal influence of the heart and the mouth.”⁵⁷ Careless words, speech without forethought, and above all, the awareness of the power of language all speak to a method of resistance for the desert fathers.

Using language deliberately may not seem like any type of resistance; however, the awareness and its resultant questioning are the places where we find resistance. If we recall Augustine and Foucault’s critique of privileged discourses, awareness was the paramount concern for them. An awareness of the power of language is frighteningly lacking in today’s world. Attention spans diminish with the proliferation of Internet access; instant gratification teaches no patience. Words become meaningless—as shown above in the brief discussion of military language. Interpersonal relationships are also affected: the skyrocketing divorce rate renders the word “commitment” empty; we do not witness a death, but a “passing.” These are but a few examples. For the desert fathers to take such care over the words they used ensures them a position of resistance.

Far more resistant, however, is silence. Something almost unheard of in the discordant cacophony of the postmodern world, silence highlights an awareness of language. Choosing silence over speech limits the danger of careless words, the destructive possibilities of language.⁵⁸

“condemn” I feel it is appropriate to include it.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 135, 146.

Silence was also, for the desert fathers, not only the way to create a place where awareness of God would thrive, but also the best means of “communicating the essence of the spiritual life.”⁵⁹ This could be done through action, through highlighting what was said, or more impressively, through a demonstration of what would happen if one only ever spoke the words of God.⁶⁰

More than this, however, silence provides a place to linger when language fails us. The alternative is to create new forms of language; to allow the meaning of words’ fluidity; to accept the mendacity of language — in short, the space of *la mystique*.⁶¹ *La mystique* shares the desert fathers’ view on the reciprocity of lingual interpretation. Michel De Certeau introduces the notion of the “mystic fable,” the transformation of speech (religious speech) since the sixteenth century from an absolute truth into a fiction that relies on an interpreter to “obtain the knowledge it expresses without knowing it.”⁶² This transformation occurs with the proliferation of writing, which has developed into a mistrust of speech, a marginalization of the spoken word. With the “triumph of writing,” the mystics are squeezed to a place on the edges of the field over which writing has triumphed: the place of “the child, the woman, the illiterate, madness, angels, or the body.”⁶³ I see this as important in light of Foucault’s analysis of contemporary privileged discourse. The discourse of progress relies heavily on the written word, and the spoken word is suspect. Ideas, theories, concepts, events, all must be rendered into writing before they can be true.

What happens to *la mystique* when the mystic attempts to render it into language? “At nova res novum vocabulum flagitat” says Lorenzo Valla.⁶⁴ But what sort of word can be used to capture the object of *la mystique*? This, claims De Certeau, is why the scientific field of *la mystique* disappears: its object is

⁵⁹ Ibid., 146–47.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 147–49. I am referring here to the “curious” story of the monks who remained silent save to chant the Psalms, at which point tongues of flames would come out of their mouths and ascend to heaven.

⁶¹ I am deliberately using the French adjective to specify the discourse of mysticism. Michael B. Smith’s use of the term validates my point concerning the limitations of language, and the invention of language.

⁶² Michel De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12.

⁶³ De Certeau, 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 75.

“the unstable metaphor for what is inaccessible.”⁶⁵ La mystique acknowledges the inability to articulate God, the experience of God, in human language.

Why speak at all then? The object is unstable, the language limited. Why speak? The mystics speak because they must. In Spanish, the human and divine communication is expressed in one word: *conversar*. La mystique concerns itself with communication, and that entails both speaking and listening.⁶⁶ In the sixteenth century, what discourse there was did not satisfy. “No saben decirme lo que quiero,”⁶⁷ “They do not know how to tell me what I want,” laments Juan de la Cruz. Something is missing, “what should be is missing.”⁶⁸ The absence demands speech and speech demands a hearing. La mystique means not just to teach those who “do not know,” but also to teach those who speak. Juan de la Cruz shows his awareness: “It is a harsh and painful thing for a soul not to understand itself and to find no one to understand it.”⁶⁹ We are back in the place of interpretation, not only needing the text to interpret us, but the listener as well. Reciprocity provides a place where we learn to understand what we say.⁷⁰

The problem of methodology remains: how to speak this “unstable metaphor”? De Certeau outlines three “illocutionary mechanisms” that set the scene allowing la mystique: a break, an empty place, and the representation of that place.⁷¹ The break constitutes a decision regarding the *modus loquendi* on which both the speaker and the listener agree. The agreement consists not on an acceptance of the inherent or absolute truth of language, but the inherent lie: “language as an endless betrayal of the intention.”⁷² We are left with a “beautiful but illegible handwriting,” like the figures of a painting by Hieronymus Bosch.⁷³ The words seem familiar, but on a closer reading, all meaning is lost. Language becomes subversive in its meaninglessness, again, positing the

inarticulateness of the divine. The agreement, the contract between the mystic and her or his addressee, and its subsequent speech act create an empty place where la mystique becomes possible. It is a place where the rules of language are suspended. The mystic must fill the empty place; he or she must “found the place from which he or she speaks.”⁷⁴ In this case, legitimacy does not stem from external sources, but “in the name of what speaks [from] within [the speaker] . . . the Real (in mystic discourse) or the Speaking Word (in prophetic discourse).”⁷⁵ The “I” of la mystique then “takes the place” of the Other; the “I” speaks in lieu of God.⁷⁶ Distinctions between the Real and the “I” collapse, legitimizing the speech act. What this act needs now is a “space of expression.”⁷⁷ A theatre, if you will, for language here works as a fiction, representing “the cosmos that served as a language for the speaking creator.”⁷⁸ Fictitious, mendacious, even imaginary: “the sayable continues to be wounded by the unsayable.”⁷⁹

As a locus of resistance, la mystique strips language of its objective, essentialist significance. Facts no longer can speak for themselves, because facts have become fictions. Even my word processing program offers a list of words that connote “unreliability,” “pretence,” “conjunction” as synonyms for “fictitious.” As if all language were not built on pretence, as if some words were absolutes. La mystique uncovers the fallibility of language; it shows us the precariousness of assuming that words are fixed somehow, can bear the weight of objectivity that we would like them too, or are capable of ordering disorder. We have asked much of language, with la mystique what we ask collapses in on itself. We enter into a non-place, not the non-place of la mystique’s religious experience, but a contemporary non-place, where language fails to express the inexpressible. Inevitably, some retreat into silence, their life lived as a place of resistance. Absence becomes their only presence.

“Art as Existence”: Resistance as Movement

Michel Foucault questions the specialization of art, categorically limiting it to objects and allowing the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 157–158. The usage of *conversar* evokes the desert father’s interpretive hermeneutic.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 158. I believe this quote is translated incorrectly in the text.; what follows is my own translation.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 164.

⁷² Ibid., 176.

⁷³ Ibid., 70.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 178. This evokes my opening remarks about postmodernism creating rules by virtue of having created them.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 180.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 78.

creative force to be taken up only by those designated as artists.⁸⁰ “But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art?” he asks.⁸¹ Schuld explicates this idea as one which would allow individuals to construct their lives under this rubric of “personal flourishing,” necessarily asking for endless diversity of lifestyles.⁸² We thus encounter arcane lives, rather than arcane language. These lives are also on the margins— some are there by choice (many of the desert fathers), others are squeezed out of their societies, considered “dangerous, even pernicious” (the “little saints” of Aquitaine).⁸³ Tellingly, we find ourselves in the realm of religious life again, a useful exemplar, it would seem, as some aspects of religious life concern themselves with questions of personal flourishing, or, put another way, “a quest for holiness.”

One such quest is the reformatory desires of the “little saints” of Aquitaine. They represent, according to De Certeau, a “mystic resistance,” which, though “powerless” was able to create a place of “difference” which “sallies forth from its repression to go elsewhere”⁸⁴ Much like la mystique creates a “non-place” in which to speak, the “little saints” created a place of resistance within the Jesuit order, a resistance which did not disappear but lingered in the margins, lingers today. Therefore, they are partakers of power. Interestingly enough, De Certeau provides us with differing perspectives of the “little saints.” We see how those in positions of power viewed them, and we see how they view themselves. The first view is laden with concepts of negativity: an “extremely dangerous affair,” “that peculiar spirit,” “[t]his new and foreign spirit of devotion,” something “distant from the common conduct of the society,” and a “contagion.”⁸⁵ De Certeau reminds us not to be too harsh with the leaders of the Jesuits, as they were still scarred by (and scared of) the experience with the *alumbrados* in sixteenth-century Spain.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Schuld, 73.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 74.

⁸³ De Certeau, 242.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 252–53.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 252. An interesting side note: Ignatius Loyola was brought up before an ecclesiastical commission to answer charges relating to his connection with and sympathy for the *alumbrados*. He was dismissed with an admonition.

However, even without this experience, an order which concerned itself with obedience was not to take lightly the “disobedience” of some of its younger members. The head of the order, Muzio Vitelleschi, admonishes one reformer not to “deviate from ‘the common norm of our Institute.’”⁸⁷ Here, power is upheld through obedience; therefore, deviance, disobedience must be admonished.

Was this disobedience? The particulars of the “peculiar spirit” were not of a rebellious resistance, but an escapist resistance.⁸⁸ De Certeau speaks of the “void” on which the institution was centred, a void created by “leaving God for God”—moving away from contemplation towards action. For contemplatives this created an interior desert, “an exile internal to prayer,” which rendered their desire uncertain.⁸⁹ For “men of action” the actions themselves became substitutes for conversation with God, and they were left (eloquently) practicing a “dull gray discipline,”⁹⁰ reminiscent of the “death in the afternoon.” The “little saints” resisted that exile, that dull gray discipline. What they willed was not of import—preparation before God is useless, since God prepared “a truth” to present instead, something at times fierce and explosive, a “furor” of mind, and a wildness.⁹¹

The “little saints” were squeezed to the margins: some left the order, some fell ill, some died, Surin was left “insane.”⁹² But they were not forgotten; their papers were collected, a text put together, their lights continue to flicker.⁹³ Their space of resistance was small, but durable.

The “little saints” did not choose, nor seem to relish their position on the margins. Their confessional letters speak to this.⁹⁴ Yet they were all unable to retreat from that position, to move back to the centre. The margins, it would seem, chose them. For the desert fathers, the separation from society involved choice and desire, for the withdrawal to the desert not only placed them physically on the margins of society, but also displayed a dramatic rejection of society, and all that it valued.⁹⁵ Burton-Christie echoes Schuld’s call for personal flourishing: “In [breaking the bonds which tied human

⁸⁷ Ibid., 265.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 286.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 258–59.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 259–60.

⁹¹ Ibid., 265.

⁹² Ibid., 270.

⁹³ Ibid. The presence of the “little saints” in De Certeau’s text speaks just to this point.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 255–56.

⁹⁵ Burton-Christie, 54.

beings to the dominant powers of the world], they revealed to themselves and to their contemporaries that it was possible to achieve a profound level of freedom.”⁹⁶

Burton-Christie calls this “freedom from care”⁹⁷ and this freedom covers more than just a break from the norms of society. It also involves renunciation, which encapsulates a plethora of concepts. Renunciation of physical things constitutes a segment of this, certainly, as vows of poverty, abstinence, and fasting are taken. Renunciation of the will takes up another part, and I would argue that this involves more than abandoning pride, or desire; there is a self-emptying, a negation of the self. The self becomes free to be filled by different things: God, the Other, a belief system, even texts. Renunciation is obvious in the desert fathers, but we find traces of it in the mystics as well, and even Augustine addresses the concept as Schuld’s work indicates.

Renunciation of physical objects was necessary for the desert fathers because they knew that possessions, or the desire to possess an object, could “consume the soul,” leaving no room for God.⁹⁸ This does not mean that renouncing all their worldly possessions and desires came easily for those who aspired to such acts, and the desert fathers were enjoined to look to Abraham, and attempt to “make the moves” to follow him, and be prepared to sacrifice everything.⁹⁹ Even to make such an attempt is marginal behaviour, certainly. If anyone were to do so in contemporary society she or he would be deemed eccentric at best. Not buying into the propaganda which tells us that possessions can make us happy, (something apparent [apparently] even in the fourth century) can be done only by a conscious decision and a continuing method of acting.

Even harder to maintain is the renunciation of the will, of oneself. For the desert fathers, this meant not only to deny oneself, but also to surrender to the will of another, an elder.¹⁰⁰ Obedience becomes the Other, the will of the self is renounced, and the empty place is filled with only obedience. In a similar fashion, the mystics decide to surrender to the will of God, a continuous decision, invoking a constant departure from the

will of the self.¹⁰¹ The mystic is thus emptied of self, and now the mystical experience can take place, in space of the “I want nothing, not even God” (for to desire God is to experience will).¹⁰² Yet both figures share the surrender of the will to words. The discourse of the mystic, as we have seen, is in a place where language is fallacious, even diabolical, and still the mystic speaks. The monks in the desert were aware, in a similar fashion, that the power of a word relied on the attitude, the will (or lack) of the receiver.¹⁰³ Burton-Christie speaks of the “willingness to carry out the words of Scripture”¹⁰⁴—is this willingness not a surrender? This practice of Scripture leads to a transformation. In this sense, the monk has emptied himself of self, he has “appropriated the text on a very deep level—in a sense [he has] become the text.”¹⁰⁵

Abba Pambo teaches that this place, this place of renunciation is where martyrs are found. This slips us back to Augustine, and his deconstruction of Rome’s “rhetoric of glory.” In his writings on martyrs, humility and self-emptying are obvious. Their response to suffering is to practice charity: “they requite brutality with patience and forgiveness . . . they gain victory in being vanquished and losing themselves for others.”¹⁰⁶ All that they did, all that they managed to do, they ascribed to God, not themselves. These sacrifices inspire; the “self-emptying acts of mercy” fill up the community with those who have seen and heard.¹⁰⁷

And here is the crux: it is this very humility, the emptied monk, mystic and martyr who has gained an “immense power.”¹⁰⁸ For Burton-Christie, this displays itself in a power over the demonic, the ability of the desert fathers to confront evil and cast out demons.¹⁰⁹ Augustine tells us that the martyrs had the ability to transform others, to inspire people to join the Christian community. He also speaks to personal humility, which takes the form of confession, and how it has the power to “disturb the pride of others.”¹¹⁰ It also has the power to remind us that our own self-identity is continually in flux, and for Augustine, and others in the Christian tradition, the only way to find a self is to lose it.¹¹¹

⁹⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 213.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 215.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 216–217.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 219.

¹⁰¹ De Certeau, 165–168.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Burton-Christie, 157.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Burton-Christie, 258.

¹⁰⁶ Schuld, 168.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Burton-Christie, 255.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 256–258.

¹¹⁰ Schuld, p. 123.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 218, Mark 8.35 (variation thereof).

De Certeau presents us with perhaps the most evocative examples of self-emptying. First, we are given the story of the idiot woman.¹¹² She is “lost there in the Other,” excluded, yet “rendering possible an entire circulation.”¹¹³ What are the effects of this deviation? Once exposed, “wisdom is born,” the sisters are transformed.¹¹⁴ De Certeau also recounts Jean-Joseph Surin’s encounter with the “enlightened illiterate.”¹¹⁵ Surin leaves his country, goes into the “wilderness.” When you leave the safety of your country, when you enter the margins of the wilderness, you may encounter angels, demons, madmen. Surin encounters an “angel” in the guise of a crude, unlettered peasant boy, who nevertheless “astonishes” him with his wisdom. Surin welcomes this “treasure” and learns from him “many wonders.”¹¹⁶ Like the idiot woman, the young boy has no place in the institutions of the church. He was born and lives on the margins, a youth, yet in the time and space given him he has grown wise. In Surin’s joyous, rapturous reaction to the boy, in his breathless letter recounting the adventure of meeting him, are we witnessing a reaction to a work of art? The idiot woman as well, venerated by the renowned monk—does he see in her a work of art? He prays to be found worthy.

Conclusions

I began by looking for value in postmodern presentation. I sought to expose whether disorder could allow growth, could allow personal flourishing. A certain type of person flourishes in such a space. The desert fathers did, their sayings and their legacy are with us today. The idiot woman and the enlightened illiterate both flourished in their obscurity—in the disorder of the kitchen, in the crudity of the “wilderness”—so much so that recognition was painful. The “little

¹¹² De Certeau, 32–33.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 36, 34.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38. I question this transformation, much as I realize it diminishes my point. The sisters take on the madness of the idiot woman (“me too me too”). They venerate her because the monk venerates her. Do they know why? They take on her madness like an ill fitting dress. They have not emptied themselves, merely tried to fill a non-empty space with her practices. It sits uneasily on them.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 207–10.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

saints” tell another story. They did not choose the margins, and poignantly, they do not flourish, but sicken, die or go mad. Choice matters, then. Resistance cannot be imposed.

But how did we get to who we are? Does looking back through history tell us why we live in an age that is more content with images and moulds than with reality?¹¹⁷ Perhaps this age is not as unique as I once thought. Perhaps Ezra Pound was speaking not merely to the modern condition, but also to the human condition. Certainly sifting through the past, examining the linkages between premodern and postmodern texts, uncovers possibly the most significant linkage. In all of this work—the desert fathers, St. Augustine, sixteenth-century mystics, Michel Foucault—the linkages show a simulacrum of responses, which beg a simulacrum of that which provokes the response. The rhetoric of Rome is not so different from the rhetoric of Western countries today. People today rarely deviate from the common norm of their “institute.” Silence remains suspect. Art is institutionalized. Time is fixed in an unvarying routine which ages us prematurely. Many of us remain unaware of the power of these constructs, of how they fix us on the social grid and inform our relations and our identities.

This is not how we are meant to be. Pockets of resistance would not spring up throughout the landscape of history were this not the case. I see it in myself: I think of the monks battling the “death in the afternoon” as I struggle to fix my attention to this very paper. I want to write; I am interested, even passionate about the subject. But the writing is painful: perhaps that is a natural response to the imposition of order on my disordered thoughts. Yet this order is needed; I could not hand my audience a jumble of notes and hope to be understood. So I follow in the footsteps of the desert fathers, and approach each word with deliberation, with awareness. A type of resistance, and perhaps new rules are created by my language, by virtue of having been created. My sentence structure, my use of tenses (questioned by readers—are they resisting?) reflect the “reveries of my inward gaze.” Ah, but who am I? One person writing one paper; what affect could that have? What affect could it not have? For it is my open-ended and creative response to this very subject matter that has taken my attention here. The age demands this of me: this is my pocket of resistance, my choice.

¹¹⁷ This contentedness thrives despite the bizarre and ironic proliferation of so-called “reality” TV, which actually speaks to my point, since there is nothing real and everything artificial about such programs.