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The Afterlife of the Avant-Garde

I

How many times have you endured such a ritual as this? How many times have you sat this way, already half defending yourself against some imminent tedium or assault, and listened, or half listened, as paragons of intellectual productivity rose to offer you the fruits of their labors, what they have learned, what they have come to know?

But let me say, quite honestly and if possible without the slightest rhetorical ploy, that I find it difficult to proceed in that manner. I cannot offer you things I have conceived through hard labor, things I have established and know to be true. All I have to offer you are suspicions, fears, urges, superstitions, habits, the faintest of glimmers, things I imagine some of you will dismiss as nonsense, or useless, or worse.

What I have to offer then is not simply the product of my thought but also of my distrust of my thought, and indeed of the very notions of productivity on which lectures like this one would seem to be based.

This is not the construction or representation of an intellectual position: on the contrary, it is quite simply the case that I find myself divided within and against my work; feel its force and at the same time can hardly believe it; find its implications impossible, idiotic, absurd. Unlike Pound's

figure of authenticity in the Chinese ideogram, I cannot stand by my word.

But at the same time this dividedness seems crucial. Perhaps it is not to be overcome but to be taken as is, pursued even further: an occasion for turning against my thought, or letting thought turn against itself; the impossibility of promoting my thought or being able to use thought to promote my own values, my self-conception, my reputation, my career. Perhaps it is the most basic conditions of one's thought that one must resist most strenuously, so that, to adopt quite purposefully the language of psychopathology, I must endure this intellectual division as a kind of sadomasochistic aggression, carried out, if you will, inside and against the body of my thought.

And although I have not the slightest desire to propose any intellectual program, to prescribe or legislate a standard or method, it would be pointless to stand before you in such a ludicrous condition if I believed that this condition were mine alone.

Still it is only in the certainty that after I have finished speaking I will never have spoken, that it is possible to speak at all.

II

For several years my work revolved around a single concern: the death of the avant-garde.¹ The notion of the avant-garde is of course complex and historically imbedded in ways that make it difficult to summarize in a brief talk, but for the moment let me simply designate as avant-garde any self-consciously advanced or oppositional movement in art or literature between, say, 1871 and 1968, the dates of two famous Parisian revolts.

For one hundred years the avant-garde was essential to a culture that defined itself by a certain dialectic of mainstream and margin, tradition and innovation, convention and experiment, status quo and revolution. The avant-garde, as Clement Greenberg claimed, kept culture moving; it was the

leading edge of our progress and a challenge to every form of cultural stagnation.² But sometime in the 1960s, let us say, there was a sudden proliferation of claims that the avant-garde had died. These obituaries were more far reaching than the typical claims that one movement had succeeded another; they were claims about the passing of an entire cultural dialectic, a system of oppositions that had seemed to be the very ground of culture for one hundred years. They were claims that the avant-garde *as such* had died.

Now autopsies of the putative corpse of the avant-garde usually reveal a predictable etiology. In general, it seems the avant-garde died because it was unable to sustain its alterity, its difference, its otherness. It produced too many signs of the same and hence exhausted its credibility. The avant-garde died because all major forms of anti-art or aesthetic resistance end up in the very museums and cultural institutions that they began by calling into question; because the avant-garde insistence on innovation reduced itself to the most trivial market for novelties; because its attacks on tradition became tradition; because its attacks on the culture of the commodity only produced more cultural commodities; because it could not at one and the same time oppose mainstream culture and serve as its research and development agency; because anti-art succeeded despite itself in becoming Art; because, in short, the avant-garde continually turned itself into everything it denounced: fashion, commodities, high art, museum culture, Western civilization, bourgeois self-indulgence, and academic commentary.

These are the causes or symptoms of the avant-garde's fatality in the standard accounts. For the most part, I was more interested in what those accounts suggested about the *perceived* order of contemporary culture than in whether or not any one of them was, strictly speaking, true; but in any case, let us accept them for the moment as a set of facts and gather them into another diagnosis: The avant-garde died of exposure.

It died by revealing itself to its enemies. It put itself to death by continually articulating itself within the discursive economy of the cultures it claimed to subvert. It buried itself

alive in the very manifestoes, events, collages, poems, and assemblages in which it proposed to live a disruptive and utopian existence. It died by putting itself in a position where people like me can appropriate it. It died of discourse. It talked, wrote, and painted itself to death.

Now this diagnosis suggests, first of all, that the avant-garde's death was not an event that occurred at the end of a long and healthy life: from the very outset everything it produced was its death; everything it produced delivered it into the arms of an economy in which death itself can be reproduced as a commodity.

European culture invented the avant-garde both to immunize itself against its opposition and to profit from a representation of opposition. The avant-garde is capital's homeopathic cure for the disease of cultural opposition.

Capital feeds off of the avant-garde; its perpetual death helps keep the monster of capital alive. That is why the death of the avant-garde must not be confused with any termination, any closure, which has not yet occurred and will never occur as long as the culture of capital persists. The death of the avant-garde is not its end but its repetition, indeed its compulsive repetition. Today this repetition calls itself postmodernism. The death of the avant-garde is precisely the cultural explosion of the so-called postmodern era, when more than ever it seems that everything verges toward exposure, publicity, the spectacle, interpretation and surveillance, and the surface of the screen.

Therefore, at a certain level, we have yet to experience the death of the avant-garde, to imagine what it might be like if the avant-garde really did cease to exist. But if that compulsive repetition by means of which the avant-garde keeps reproducing itself under different names is, as we shall see, its primary form of death, even so, one might still imagine a second death, the death of this repetition itself. To speak of the afterlife of the avant-garde will not be to imagine the next style, manifesto, movement, or postmodern pretense of superceding avant-garde repetitions. The afterlife of the avant-garde will be the first confrontation with the silence of death and will produce precisely nothing.

III

Perhaps the strangeness of this situation, the absurdity of this silence, demands further reflection.

I have in mind a logo representing militancy against the public management of the AIDS crisis, a design in which the notorious pink triangle by which the Nazis designated homosexuals is linked with this equation: Silence = Death. We are thereby enjoined not to be silent but to speak out, to state the truth about AIDS and demand that the nation listen and act. Only through an organization of voices can those under sentence of death be saved. Silence here is a form of suppression, or a form of complicity with oppression. A form of moral cowardice. Of murder.

One finds the same sort of equation in those hitherto marginalized or suppressed discourses of women and ethnic minorities who, after silent centuries, now explode into voice and struggle to make themselves heard. Silence here is "unnatural," as Tillie Olsen writes, a thwarting of everything vital and creative in the human spirit.³

Indeed, nothing could be closer to the heart of our moral and political thinking than the necessity to speak out, to bear witness, to give voice to the truth. And *nothing said here will contradict such a necessity for those who must claim it*. But at the same time, as the death of the avant-garde makes manifest, in this culture one can also die by speaking. One can also play into the hands of a generalized violence against secrecy.

It is here that one begins to imagine another monstrous order in which the equation of silence and death is not rejected but embraced, in which the deepest necessity is to seek this silence and death.

One imagines such a silence so that one's own writing will become untenable. Under the sign of silence and death, writing turns against itself with enormous fury; it becomes a kind of masocriticism, if you will, subjecting itself to the laws of the discursive economy it loathes in order to inflict upon itself an unprecedented suffering that will make writing, as long as it continues, impossible.

That will make writing the practice of a certain disappearance. A certain silence.

That will make writing a strange shadow whose sole purpose is to mark the destruction of the body that once stood between its light and its earth.

IV

Although from now on I will rarely even mention cultural history, it is important to remember that I have no other object in mind.

As a way to proceed I will refer to three figures, three writers whom I find it very difficult to read and therefore am compelled to read: Sade, Freud, and Georges Bataille.

I take it as a further indication of the weakness of my thought that I can find no other way to proceed than by rounding up the usual suspects, conscripting these three weary gentlemen, these venerable citizens of the empire of discourse. It is easy enough to dislike this sort of logophagy, this academic black mass in which famous names are incanted and ghosts summoned up to do one's bidding, even to inaugurate a project none of them would recognize.

It is especially difficult to speak about Sade. One can hardly mention a writer as devoted to violent subjugation as was Sade, especially when one knows that a certain portion of one's audience is likely to have experienced the violence of victimization, for instance at the hands of someone they do not know or someone they know all too well.

Though perhaps it is in part because one does live among people who have been subjected to such terror that it is necessary to think about Sade.

But I will begin by speaking of him as a writer.

To do so is not, I hope, to offer yet another apology for Sade, of the kind that for some time has constituted a sizable academic industry. Neither will it be to insist on his most irredeemable features as a way to identify oneself vicariously with a violent sublime. I will not propose an aesthetic Sade, who might anaesthetize what is most challeng-

ing in Sade. For it is only as actual that the disturbance produced by Sade's writing makes any sense; it is only as actual that Sade's writing becomes as unacceptable as it must be in order to be read.

And yet even so one must consider Sade first as a writer.

You must imagine him sitting chastely alone in his cell, in some tower of the Bastille or the Château de Vincennes, writing quite properly, quite furiously, expending himself onto his pages, hundreds of pages at a time. What Sade explored on those pages was not only the darkness of his desires but also certain powers of language. For even if we are persuaded that Sade had only one thing to say and its name is sadism, the subjection of the other to an extreme exercise of will, indeed the torture and destruction of the other, there is, after all, another sadism, one whose singular purpose is to say everything.

"However much men may shudder," Sade wrote, "philosophy must say everything."

As Maurice Blanchot indicates, the first of all Sadean freedoms is the freedom to say everything. A freedom that, like all Sadean freedoms, becomes a demand.

It is not simply that for Sade no atrocity can go unimagined, undescribed, unanalyzed at excessive length; it is not simply that, at a certain level, nothing is left to silence. What is more important is the atrocity of language itself. Language is power. Indeed, it is the most terrible power of all. That is why it occupies a special place in the Sadean order. Every other form of abuse and perversion the libertines heap on their victims they heap on themselves as well. But they reserve for themselves the right to use language.

As is so often noted, what differentiates the sisters Juliette and Justine, one a ferocious libertine, the other a perpetual victim, is not the violence they suffer: the same things are done to both bodies, but Juliette calls this violence down on herself. It is language that separates the sisters: the power to articulate violence.⁴ The question is then: If Juliette is free to use language to exert her will, why does she use it to subject herself to nearly every one of the horrors suffered by her victims? One could pursue this question

in a dozen different directions, but here we will pursue only one: that the rage to say everything is itself the equal sign that links silence and death. To say everything is precisely to exhaust language, to put it to death, to empty it into the silence that it always sought.

Perhaps Juliette called all of these horrors down on herself out of a desire to put an end to this calling, as Sade himself wrote copiously, voluminously, in order to evacuate language.

Of course one cannot come to the end of language by a kind of extension. The everything that must be said is not a mathematical sum. In this direction, obviously, language is inexhaustible: there is always more to say. To exhaust language is rather to tear open a silence within it. That is Blanchot's reading of Sade.

Having to blaspheme, to exalt evil, to support the passions of crime, none of that mattered much to him, and while he did not deprive himself of doing so, there was no question of being satisfied with it. Something more violent comes to light in this rage for writing, a violence that did not manage to exhaust or allay all the excesses of a superb or wild imagination, but that was always less powerful than the transport of a language which could not bear to stop any more than it could imagine a limit. . . . Here, the main impropriety is entrusted to the simple power of repetition—the impropriety of a narration that meets with no prohibition because there is none left . . . but the time of *entre-dire*, that pure stop which can be attained only if speaking never ceases.⁵

Everything must be said over and over again. It is not only the brute proliferation of crimes that characterizes Sade but the fact that in transgressing every limit he must repeat himself ceaselessly; and the only way to put an end to this discourse lies in the *entre-dire*, the interval of silence between the words of an utterance, a between saying that functions only because the discourse goes on forever, emptying itself out, destroying itself as it goes along, cancelling itself

in a movement in which everything is lost, including the writer himself, precisely because everything is always said.

Thus Sadean excess is not a pure inflation of the ego at the expense of the other; true excess is the ruin of the self, of all its projects and discourses, its petty exercises of will. The first and last thing ruined by excess is its own body. Its deepest desire is to leave nothing in its wake. That is what links Sade the writer to Juliette the libertine: finally, the object of their violence is themselves, and it is a violence that is unthinkable without the peculiar conjunction of language, silence, and death.

Sade as his own victim?

Roland Barthes notes that often, in discussing his writing, Sade instructs himself, addresses himself, not in the second person familiar but with the formal *vous*: "Do not depart from the plan in any way . . . detail the beginning . . . soften the first part . . . recapitulate carefully. . . ."⁶ Sade puts himself at a distance, subjugates himself, arranges himself, one might say, as the libertines instruct and arrange their victims. He treats himself as the other, speaks to himself across an internal division that, for us, is also the bridge between sadism and masochism.

For there are after all two Sades. There is the Sade who wept when his manuscripts were lost in the Bastille, a loss that seemed to make it impossible for him to impose his will on the history of literature, to be remembered forever. But there is also another Sade, one who wished to be utterly annihilated, dismembered, to undergo what Lacan calls a "second death," in which "the disappearance of the subject is redoubled," "the dispersed elements of our body [are] themselves destroyed, lest they ever reassemble again."⁷

This second Sade, this Sade of the second death, is the one who left the following notorious instructions in his will:

Once my grave has been filled in, it must be sewn with acorns so that, in the future, the ground will again be covered with vegetation, the copse will be as thick as before, and the traces of my tomb will disappear from the surface

of the earth, as I hope my memory will vanish from the memory of men.⁸

Sade is no modernist. Unlike Pound or Eliot, he does not wish to recollect, rearrange, collage the fragments of civilization in a way that will prefigure some better future. He would have no interest in the avant-garde attempt to dismantle bourgeois art only to reassemble its elements once more within the discursive economy, within Art and Culture, in the moribund form of the aesthetic commodity. It is because culture is, like Frankenstein, so adept at such reassemblies, at reproducing phantasms of life from the scattered limbs of the dead, that a second death must occur, an afterlife that is the first encounter with death, a death carried out, in Sade's work, by the continuous production of sentences, sentences that are always punctuated as death sentences.

The death of the author? It has long been a critical cliché. But the lesson of Sade is that the only author whose death matters is the author of the text one writes.

V

What occupies the space of the *entre-dire* and drives it forward through the terminal and interminable succession of Sadean sentences, continually opening them and continually emptying them out? Perhaps the death drive itself.

In some of Freud's later works, the impossible notion of the death drive occupied a special place. Far from immortality or the endless satisfaction of pleasures (or rather, at their deepest level), Freud came to believe that the organism desired most of all to die, "in its own way." The death drive is a primordial force, indeed the only "primordial force," deeper than life, life's "final purpose."⁹

Repetition compulsions, which we have already encountered, are the simplest expressions of this absurd drive. For Freud, according to Jean Laplanche, "the most varied manifestations of repetition . . . are attributed to the

essence of drives" (Laplanche 1985, 107). The psychic economy is driven by a desire to preclude change through repetition, that is to say, through a principle of constancy. But this principle of constancy is itself the expression of a deeper principle: a zero principle. For Freud there is an absolute "primacy of zero in relation to constancy" (108). The constancy that the organism seeks must finally be identified as death.

Furthermore, this zero principle is ineluctably connected to aggression. Sadean aggression toward the other is in fact a displacement of a more fundamental autoaggression. According to Laplanche,

a part of the primal destructiveness is deflected toward the external world, giving rise to the manifestation we identify as aggressiveness. Thus . . . what is affirmed here is the primacy of self-aggression over heteroaggression, that self-aggression being, in turn, only the consequence of the absolute primacy within the individual of the tendency toward zero, conceived as the most radical form of the pleasure principle. (110)

The primacy of autoaggression. What Sade desired most of all was not the destruction of the other but the pleasure of his own destruction, which is also to say the death of his discourse, its utter dismemberment. Sadism cannot be separated from what Freud described as primary masochism, at one and the same time the most radical form of the pleasure principle and its destruction, an autoaggression driven by the desire for death itself.

We can see this not only in Sade's prose and its mania for saying everything in order to say nothing, but in what might even be called his ethics, where nothing is more fundamental than the fact that the other can do to the libertine what he or she does to the other. Sade's ostensible heroes are often destroyed by someone else's exercise upon them of the same "freedoms" they pretend to possess absolutely, including the freedom to say everything.

This is where Lacan locates Sade's ethics. Unlike the Kantian moral subject, who acts as the agent of a universal

law, Lacan's Sade acts only within the following order: the other has absolute agency.¹⁰ "Someone may say to me," Sade writes, "I have the right to use your body for my pleasure, any time, in any way I like." For Lacan, the crucial passage is the one everyone else seems to forget. Not "I have the right to use your body," but "Someone may say to me." Agency—here the power to articulate violence—is given to someone else.

Such an ethics will surely be contested. But what is at stake here first of all is the primacy of autoaggression over heteroaggression. The first someone who uses my body for a pleasure grounded in death itself is myself, turned against me in a primary masochism, even in the expenditure of language. Thus, far from the exercise of a single phallic will, whatever its fantasies about itself, the Sadean subject is always heterogeneous, and every act it imagines inflicting on another is the trace of an act it inflicts upon itself, an expression of its own furious drive toward zero. So also in its discourse: every repetition is the trace of an impossible desire to vanish between the links of the chains of perversion and signification.

VI

Nothing is more wasteful than death: that is one reason why the notion that death is our most fundamental drive, indeed that death is synonymous with the concept of drives, is virtually unthinkable for us.

We who value use above all, who want above all to make ourselves useful, who rebel or despair when we are unemployed or our labors seem useless, who think of wasted time as dead time that we must fill up with productive activity.

Hence the conjuring of my third ghost, Georges Bataille.

Bataille imagines a "general economy" driven neither by exchange value nor by use value—the only terms of value Marxism allows—but by waste, by loss, by destructiveness, by pure expenditure. Far from the popular ecological notion of a perfect natural balance in which everything

created is required in those exact proportions for the system's maintenance, Bataille's notion is of natural and social systems that produce far more energy or wealth than they can ever use and must find ways to consume or spend their excess. "On the surface of the globe," Bataille writes, "for living matter in general, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance."¹¹ The proper image of this excess is the sun, or as Bataille often sees it, the "solar anus," the most glorious icon of wealth, wasted energy, and expenditure, the sun that gives life only by using itself up, by driving toward its own death. "Solar energy is the source of life's exuberant development. The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy—wealth—without any return" (Bataille 1985, 28). As Alphonso Lingis writes in a lucid Bataillean passage from which every explicit reference to Bataille has been purged,

The sun is as it were in excess relative to itself. The problem, at the source and essence of wealth, is one of expenditure. The sun destines all its forces to annihilation; it is burning itself out as fast as it can. It squanders its enormous energy, most of which is lost in the emptiness. The crystalline and mental systems, which have taken form around the sun and reflect its radiance, owe their origin to the compulsion of solar force to discharge itself far from itself; the solar outlay without profit is ostentatious. This spectacular consummation of wealth without end, without utility, without recompense and without gratitude is the objective form of glory.

In the furious solar drive to expend its force outside of itself, the void becomes spectacular, matter crystallizes and combines, heliotropic life forms and contracts order. It would be an illegitimate extrapolation of the laws and special economics of reasonable animals to suppose that these [life-forms] are the goal of all this dissipating energy. The solar energy constitutes all the force with which these formations subsist; its essence is in all of them. The exploding force seems to be captured, capitalized in them, but that is only an appearance, of brief duration. The tide of

solar energy cannot be arrested; all these systems are destined to be consumed in their turn by the force within them, which will consume the inexorable solar expenditure at a loss. They . . . are not terminal entities, subsistent causes or goals, whose value would lie in their being, their coherent and self-conserving essence. They are the spectacular and glorious modes in which an unproductive excess is consumed.¹²

Existence can no longer be measured by use. Life must see itself in the light of the glorious self-destructions of solar expenditure that brought it into being. It must take its place in nature not by the conservation of forces but by realizing itself as waste. Life is the product of waste and wastes itself as it lives. This would seem to be the complete reversal of the environmentalist ethos, or indeed of a cultural economy designed to produce immortal works and protect them from the forces that seek to destroy them. On the contrary. We are neither the destroyers nor the caretakers of a system of perfect balances. The only way for us to take our place in nature is to realize our excesses and lose ourselves the way everything else in nature does. We must give ourselves up entirely to the fatal teleology of matter.

So also in our cultural and discursive economies. Neither use value nor exchange value but the squandering of riches. For Bataille, the epitome of this exuberance is a radical form of gift giving once practiced by Northwest tribes, the potlatch. As Bataille observes, "Classical economics imagined that primitive exchange occurred in the form of barter; it had no reason to assume, in fact, that a means of acquisition such as exchange might have as its origin not the need to acquire that it satisfies today, but the contrary need, the need to destroy and lose," hence potlatch, "the opposite of a principle of conservation," a principle of "the positive property of loss."¹³ In the potlatch, a tribal headman tries to establish his rank, his glory, by giving gifts to another. Of course, gifts, as Marcel Mauss and others have argued, are poison. Everyone knows that a gift must somehow be repaid, that one gift demands another. But in the pot-

latch, one seeks to give a gift that cannot be returned. The potlatch is, in effect, a form of combat, but a combat in which one overcomes the other by giving away so much that the other cannot repay the gift. It is expenditure in excess of any possibility of compensation. A tribal headman might give away everything he owned in order to triumph in the potlatch; to be the brightest of suns he might give away his whole village, even burn it to the ground.

Now it would seem that this form of luxury privileges the wealthiest, those who have most to spend. But Bataille insists that one should never expect such glories from the bourgeoisie, who are "incapable of concealing a sordid face, a face so rapacious and lacking in nobility, so frighteningly small, that all human life, upon seeing it, seems degraded" (Bataille 1985, 125). On the contrary,

true luxury and the real potlatch of our times falls to the poverty stricken, that is, to the individual who lies down and scoffs. A genuine luxury requires the complete contempt for riches, the somber indifference of the individual who refuses work and makes his life on the one hand an infinitely ruined splendor, and on the other, a silent insult to the laborious life of the rich. . . . [H]enceforth no one can discover the meaning of wealth, the explosiveness it heralds, unless it is the splendor of rags and the somber challenge of indifference. (Bataille 1988, 76-77)

That is the fatal luxury that art or thought or writing must finally achieve. It is all they can ever achieve.

VII

In their own way, Bataille's ideas are at least as troubling as Sade's. They seem to invite us to rationalize rampant consumerism, to excuse toxic dumping and other environmental disasters, to romanticize nuclear holocaust (what more glorious and solar expenditure of life?), or to speak about poverty as luxury and leave the poor to rot in

the streets. Perhaps that is what Bataille wants us to think, and, if so, one might well be troubled by his writing.

But for the moment, let us imagine that Bataille is proposing an excess, an expenditure, an autoaggressive potlatch in which writing or art or thought itself proceeds without return, without recompense, without recourse to any system of conservation; an art no longer constrained by the discursive economics of either exchange value or use value; an art that impoverishes itself in the most material ways; an art that no longer expends itself into what Blake called the "maw of commerce," that cultural economy within which the feeble excesses of the historical avant-gardes are subjected to the severest disciplines.

The avant-garde, which always began in brilliant refusals and destructions, must in the end abandon those economies that, with frightening efficiency, have put it to use, made it instrumental, profited from it, developed ways to get a return even from negation, even from the death drive itself.

In the light of the sun of expenditure, such a culture seems the narrowest of misconceptions.

Imagine instead that the vast proliferation of writing, drawing, painting, performance—not just what cultures have preserved for us through the filtration systems of their own values, but all writing, all music, and so on—is the actual, lived field of culture; that culture is waste, expenditure: productivity and destruction without any exclusion or discrimination; that all of these works have been produced not so that a few precious articles of value, the "best that has been known and thought," can, through a sort of reasoned brokerage, be conserved as culture per se, but so that they would be destroyed; that what is most important about all of those poems and paintings and constructions is precisely that the vast majority of them disappear even as they are born, that they dismember and consume themselves without our ever knowing them, vanish in the air, into the death they most desired, never to be remembered again.

Imagine a writing that saw itself in this light, a light that never shines on most of what we call culture, that never consigns itself to productive discourse but always es-

capex, that is valuable only because it escapes, because it is elsewhere, nowhere.

Or imagine a certain book: it arrives uncalled for, unpredicted, perhaps in the mail, perhaps fallen from the sky, unmarked by a publisher's apparatus, by advertising, even by an author's name; a book made of white noise that erases itself as it goes along and everything you say for weeks is stolen from it; a book that you cut into pieces and disseminate at random (on the street, on walls, through the mail) or that you burn without having read it and scatter the ashes to the four winds; or imagine such a book that you never receive in the first place.

Perhaps that is the useless book one must learn to write, that is the only book one ever writes. Or perhaps it is precisely a book one cannot write, but only imagine, and in imagining it call it down upon one's writing, to tear one's own writing apart.

As this talk, this argument that began at cross-purposes and went nowhere, unravelling itself as it proceeded, even now beginning to cease vibrating in the air, will soon vanish, leaving nothing but a fading imprint on your memories, soon to be effaced as you turn toward more productive labors, and itself only the trace of an expenditure whose disappearance it briefly betrayed.