

A château in France, a velveteen covered desk, a soft changing light in the salon on a day of rolling whites and wispy greys with sunny *éclaircis*, a wall of glass doors through which little white butterflies playing tag over a flower dotted field. Early that morning he had seen a goshawk, a black kite, and various song birds in the chateau forest as well as three grey herons at a piece of water on the property in the Val de Loire. He was listening to the meditations of a Schubert quintet, C major, D956 (op. 163), the Weller Quartet with Dietfried Gurtler second cello. In the final movement, dance-like, the butterflies seemed to be dancing in the air to Schubert.

“Cowly owl, is it not?” remarked his companion in French, a Frenchman.

“Very owl,” Waldo affirmed. Waldo did not understand French very well, he was in the habit of translating conversation, often a little too literally, as it unfolded. In the case of *vachement chouette*, since *vache* meant cow, *vachement* must have meant cowly, while *chouette* meant screech owl. He assumed his companion was talking about the view, which looked like a tapestry, but why a tapestry should look like an owl, much less a cow, he couldn’t tell. Maybe tapestries often had cows and owls in them, so that when a flowery field looked like a tapestry it was considered cowly owlish.

“The umbrellas are dancing to the music,” Pierre went on. This one stopped Waldo until he remembered that he often got *parapluie* mixed up with *papillon*, butterfly.

“You noticed it also?” responded Waldo. “It is perhaps that one trains butterflies in France?” Lately he had been catching on to the custom of witty repartee here.

"I believe not," dry laugh. "We leave that and puritan sexual training to you Anglo-Saxons. It is rather that as the music plays the mind follows its rule, is it not?"

"But if the mind, as mine, does not understand the rules of music, how can it be otherwise than unruly?" asked Waldo.

"The rules of the game, my friend, do not need to be understood. Finally, one plays more easily by the rules when they are least understood," answered Pierre.

"Do we speak of playing? or gaming?" inquired Waldo. "Because while games have rules, play has none. The music may have rules but the mind can play with it as it wants."

"I am not in accord," said Pierre. "There are always rules, though we may not like them and at the limit they may be tragic. The first rule is death, and it is also the last. This is true, I believe, even in the United States."

"Yes, but for example," said Waldo. "American jazz has rules only in the making of it, so it is a kind of play to begin with. This is perhaps the case with all good music in some degree, that it discovers its rules finally in the process of composition, not before the fact. Thus the only ones who know the rules before the fact are the performers, and perhaps the audience. Then, for the players it is a game, while for the composer it is play."

"No doubt life is less complicated in the United States, but we have discovered that, in order to be liberated, you need rules to transgress, in order to be free you need first to be enchained. Read your Sade. All the same, we musn't forget either, my old person, that liberty is a French idea, and a French idea in the States is not the same as a French idea in France. But then, would you like to try a game of chess?" asked Pierre.

"Thank you, but I don't like games," replied Waldo. "I find them boring."

"Desolated. Then, till I see you again." Pierre left. There was a weekend party at the chateau with a various and international guest list. So, almost simultaneously, an American college student came in. Waldo was not excessively delighted at her entrance, since he was eager to be alone with Schubert and the dancing butterflies. And here was this rather plain and pious looking jeune-fille whose mind was no doubt seething with literal observations struggling to plod loose. But on second look she seemed to vibrate with a confusing if not confused energy

and had a certain pneumatic fleshiness to her that cushioned the intrusion. She didn't say hello, what she said was, "Do you realize we're just a few kilometers from where Rabelais was born and raised?"

"You like Rabelais?" asked Waldo. A point in her favor.

"Give me a break! He was the best thing in my Humanities course. Rabelais is cool."

"What's so cool about Rabelais?" he inquired further.

"Because he'll just say anything," she exclaimed. "He's so experimental. He goes, like, completely loose."

"Saying you can just say anything is good example of saying anything. But you can't say anything, or you can but it can also be completely stupid," observed Waldo.

"What do you mean? I can say whatever I like. And I'm saying it."

"Really."

"Really. I'm an American. It's a free country. There aren't any rules on freedom of speech."

"Just because there are no rules doesn't mean you can say whatever you like. Let's take a walk," Waldo suggested.

He took her into the woods. It was late spring, the trees were full, the birds were out in force.

"What's your name? Jane?"

"How did you know?"

"You hear that, Jane?" Waldo said. "I mean the birdsong. You think they're just singing anything? They're singing to find mates, they're singing to define their territories. Experimental they are not. Nor are they playing games. But they are playing and their playing is a kind of thinking, thinking out loud, speaking your mind you might say if mind includes feelings as it indeed does, like a saxophone solo in a jazz piece. That's what Rabelais is like, a sax solo. Or maybe more like a raucous Dixieland band."

A crow flapped down, landing on a bough that bent under its weight. "If you want my opinion," said the crow, "you humans are very limited with your games and competitions. We crows have contests too, we often have flying contests, for example, but they're games that no one wins and no one loses. Your games are obsessed with death. Every game ends in a little death or an escape from death. The possibilities are very limited. You win or you lose. That's why your games are obsessive and repetitive, surrogate for death, the

underlying rule. Very limited. While in our kind of play the possibilities are infinite and nurturing. Functional. Open ended, exploratory, a process of discovery, including exposure of hidden rules and discovery of new and better rules. As such it differs from games which impose their rules, creating an artificial situation cut off from reality and trapped in psychology. You can never escape from your obsessions and preconceptions.”

“You do a lot of talking for a crow. What’s your name?”

“Edgar Allen.”

“I mean your last name.”

“Crow.”

“Ah. That explains your concern with death.”

“It explains nothing. Just because Poe liked crows doesn’t mean that crows like Poe. The favorite crow author is Laurence Sterne.”

“Why is that?”

“He writes as the crow flies. The crow flies in zigs and zags, in spirals and swoops, in grand detours and flappy fractals, but always finds the shortest vector between two points.”

“The falcon is faster and more direct.”

“Ah, but those are different kinds of points. They only factor speed and direction. Which is not the point. The point is you have to remember that crows are animals, despite their great intelligence. And that beside that the intelligence of animals is in some ways more acute than the intelligence of people. Only we express it differently. Birds, for example, write with their bodies in the sky.” He flapped his wings and jumped off his bough into the air, grazing tree trunks in his floppy flight.

“You talk to crows?” exclaimed Jane incredulously.

“I talk to whoever listens. I talk to you. I talk to the dead.”

“But do they answer?”

“Of course. When asked. Where would we be if the dead didn’t answer? Gnawing on bones in caves.”

“I’m a vegetarian,” she objected.

“On carrots, then. Don’t be too literal, it confuses me.”

“What were you talking about? With the crow?”

“We were talking about mistaken ideas of form.”

“What do you mean by form?”

“What do I mean by form? You’re absolutely Socratic, do you know that? Next you’ll be asking me what I mean by mean.”

Jane looked upset. "I'm sorry, I didn't intend to be Socratic. I'll try to be less Socratic but I don't even know what you mean exactly."

"Let's say that form is your footprints in the sand. Do you understand footprints in the sand?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then you understand form."

"But I . . ."

"Believe me that's all you need to understand. Now you can forget it."

"Give me an example."

"The best example I can think of is a writer named Ronald Sukenick."

"Oh, right. We had to read him in my Postmodern Fiction course. He really turned me off."

"Oh really."

"Really. I couldn't understand what he was talking about."

"He was talking about you. No doubt that's why you couldn't understand him."

"Well why is he a good example of form?"

"Of a certain kind of form. The kind of form that informs everyday life. Not the kind of form frozen in great examples from the past."

"I still don't understand."

"No. And the fish doesn't understand water."

"Sukenick's book wasn't even writing. It didn't have plot or characters or a message."

"Which one did you read?"

"*Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues.*"

"That's one of the best examples of the kind of formal organization implicit in contemporary life."

"Why?"

"Why, why. Because it employs fractal organization, discontinuity, interactivity, ellipse, eclipse, non-sequitur, incompleteness, association, chance, coincidence, achronicity, synchronicity, improvisation, intervention, self-contradiction, overlap, mosaic, modularity, graphic composition, sonic formation, rhythmic symmetry, vortextualization and eddyfication, rhizomatic interconnection, hypertextual hopscotch, paradox, wordplay, and in conclusion, inconclusion, all of it fluctuating faster than thought. Just look around you."

"All I can see is trees.

"That's why you don't see the forest."

"I mean all that stuff you're talking about, I never heard of it."

"Complain to your professors. Nobody ever heard of it in 1979 either, when Sukenick wrote it."

"Unless you mean, like, Tom Robbins. He's really cool."

"Get out of here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean beat it."

"But I don't know where I am."

"Good. Get lost, Jane. That's exactly what you need."

He left her standing there, mouth open as if to say something which, luckily, he would never have to hear.

Quickly wheeling into an intersecting path, Waldo almost bumped into a ruddy man with big belly, blue blazer, greying beard, and stick, topped by a yachting cap, all of it very naval.

"I say, what's the rush?" An Englishman obviously.

"I'm fleeing Generation X. Aren't you?"

"Can one? Horatio," thrusting out his hand.

"No. Waldo," taking it.

"I say, was that you reeling off that impressive list of terminology that I heard through the trees?"

"That depends on who wants to know."

"What I mean, old boy, is it takes me back to the old days at Eton and Oxbridge."

"How so?"

"Because what they used to do was whip us into remembering long lists of rhetorical terms. And what was wafting through the trees, though I couldn't hear it too distinctly, sounded suspiciously like a long list of rhetorical terms."

"I didn't think of it that way."

"You should do a glossary, old boy."

"Somebody should, not me. But I suppose you have a point."

"Of course I have a point. If I didn't have a point I would have bloody well kept my mouth shut. My point is that you Yanks always think you're being original when you're just repeating something that's been done before and done better. You're almost as bad as the bloody Frogs who can't do anything without making a bloody revolution out of it."

“It may be true that I’m talking a new kind of rhetoric, at least you could look at it that way. And it may even be true that the whole deconstructive movement in letters consists of a rediscovery of rhetoric after a long period of lost prestige, one that parallels a loss of prestige for representation and perspective in painting. But there’s one big difference in my connection to the tradition, and that is it’s strictly antiformalist. Maybe because I’m American.”

“There’s no such thing as American, old boy. Maybe it’s because you’re colonial would be more like it. Postcolonialism is the dirty secret of American so-called culture. Despite the fact we’re currently being over run by the tide of populist sewage generated by your consumer economy. Though I have to admit it’s not as bad as the potential injection of continental influences through the bloody Common Market. We’ve already had our first case of rabies in a hundred years, no doubt the result of some mad dog racing through the bloody Chunnel.”

“It’s true that in the States we have a schizy view of the ex-colonizing nations, France no less than England—favoring one over the other with excessive respect combined with excessive contempt—or maybe just plain excess of affect. We’re a schizoid culture. Our formative catastrophes, the Revolutionary and Civil wars, were each in their ways schizophrenic. In European cultures the major threat comes from outside, encouraging paranoia. And as everyone knows, paranoia is a powerful way of organizing experience in fixed systems. Thus the great surrogate universes of Modernist art, basically a European movement, in which the important American influences lead straight to Postmodernism. Leaving aside Tom Pynchon, who with his paranoid style is maybe our most Modernist writer.”

“And what has this got to do with antiformalism, pray?”

“Because schizophrenia is a fluctuating system. It keeps changing perspectives and doesn’t tolerate fixed form. It breaks down virtuosity, that necessary complement of formalism, the talent of repeating a single mode better than anyone else. As opposed to improvisation, the ability to invent new modes so that perfection of them becomes secondary. The net result is a democratization of culture and its expression in the arts. You don’t need to sing a high C better than anyone else, that’s not the point.”

“My god, it sounds as if all this adds up to some sort of nouveau populism. We don’t want any more little Ezra Pounds running around, do we?”

“One thing is that in the States the outsider tactic of the so-called avant-garde may have always been based on an ill-conceived imitation of European models. That was one of Pound’s first mistakes—damn the man in the street. In America the outside becomes the ‘in’ side with amazing rapidity. So much so that the best path to advancement in the American arts is to present yourself as a rebel. What it adds up to is that change in the States comes from inside not outside. Everyone in the States instinctively realizes this. Henry Miller is just an extension of the born again strain in American culture. Salvation in rebirth, not in social welfare or political programs. Though a politician who embodies that hope of personal regeneration will make a clean sweep. In the States the personal is the best way to gain media access to the public. That’s because public space is wiping out personal space, making it available only in public.”

“It seems to me that anyone caught up in the American media machine will just be ground up and spit out in the image of the consumerist status quo.”

“Anyway, there’s no choice. There is no outside any more. Electronics have done away with that kind of spatial metaphor, and even temporal conceptions essential to an avant-garde movement have been annulled in the electrosphere. On the Internet it doesn’t matter where you are or when you are.”

“Are we speaking of selling out here?”

“There are some things that can’t be sold because they can’t be bought. No, we’re talking about mutiny. If I were a politician I’d propose a platform of progressive mutiny. Mutiny does not need a program, it does not need an ideology. Mutiny is not revolution or even rebellion. It does not need leaders and it does not need blood. It does not proceed from alienation, but is an impulse from the inside to reclaim its own identity. It is an eruption of the spiritual unconscious. Mutiny is a movement of collective conviction and revulsion, a refusal to proceed as usual, a diversion of the channels of power to more constructive ends. A mutiny does not even have to win and so can’t be defeated. There’s nothing to win, there’s simply the diffusion of a vision as the agent of change. Currently it’s the Internet versus the world wide cobweb. 1968 was a mutiny that changed Western culture more profoundly than a revolution. In comparison, the Russian Revolution was an upheaval that turned

Russia into, well, Russia. The Civil Rights Movement was a mutiny. The fall of the Iron Curtain was a mutiny. The ecological movement is a mutiny in progress.”

“Not to my way of thinking. Mutiny is just a symptom of *nostalgie de la boue*, as they say here, and the kind of people who have that impulse are no better than swine rooting in mud.”

“There are more ways of thinking, Horatio, than are defined in the Trivium and Quadrivium. Not to mention Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.”

“I like the ways of thinking we already have, thank you. Introducing others can only cause trouble. Who knows what people might start thinking about?”

“What I’m talking about is quite practical really. You English are supposed to be good at that. I’m simply saying that the forms of culture we have to work with don’t work and that the only kind of form worth talking about today is form that’s completely eccentric. You’re supposed to be good at that too. Being eccentric.”

“What does eccentric mean to you?”

“Doing something the wrong way that turns out to be right.”

“Now why would that make any sense at all?”

“Because there is no right way. Trying to do something the right way, therefore, is precisely when you go wrong. Never rule out the unacceptable. Coming at things with no preconceptions is the way, but you only know it’s right after the fact. That’s why Art Brut is so interesting, because it’s by definition beyond the acceptable. There’s only one thing that’s totally and finally unacceptable in art and that is art itself, the category and all the institutions that support it. It’s industrial culture’s way of isolating a number of powerful human faculties that aren’t productive in it, that may even be disruptive for it. Museums, libraries, campuses are actually zoos within the game preserve of what we call culture. In fact Art Brut isn’t art, it’s a prison break.”

“Of course I’ve heard of Art Brut, but my impression is that it’s simply work by autodidacts, convicts, and crazies without any criteria. People who should probably be loaded on a lorry and dumped in the Loire.”

“But that’s the thing, there are no artistic criteria, there are just the criteria of everyday life—intellect, spirit, information, relevance, utility, elegance, perception, etcetera. What’s wrong with that? Those are the criteria we should be applying anyway. The same ones we

apply to any craft or intellectual pursuit. Special criteria make the arts into a power trip, irrelevant and impotent, except as another way for so-called experts to bully people who aren't in on the game."

"Well, I mean, you need something to bully people with, after all, and art seems a good solution. Obviously you don't want to use a machine gun when you can use a fire hose. Let's try to be humane."

"You're interested in domination, I'm interested in liberation."

"I hope you know what you're in for when you start liberating people."

"Whatever it is in we're in for we're in for anyway because people have already been programmed for domination and submission. But I'm a deprogrammer, that's how I get my kicks."

"So when you don't like a program you just give it a kick and hope for the best?"

"No, I start with the little things. How to read. How to write. How to think."

"Is there a method to this madness?"

"You have to go back to what you call my rhetoric. It all adds up to reader liberation."

The trees were thinning out and opening up. Soon they came in sight of the old château.

"Well," remarked Waldo, "looks like we're out of the woods."

"I think it'll be a while," replied Horatio, "before you're out of the woods, old chap. Pardon me, we're getting toward lunch, or at least I am." He headed for the château, while Waldo stretched out on a canvas trans-at, admiring the well-kept elegance of the grounds as well as the buildings themselves. They must require a lot of attention. Who was responsible for all this? Waldo wondered, as the old Châtelaine appeared on a terrace, framed by a gothic doorway, in her gardening clothes smoking her pipe.

"Hurr," said a rather feline voice. Waldo looked around but didn't see anybody in his immediate vicinity.

"Hurr, hurr," the voice again. It seemed to be coming from somewhere close, maybe even from his own body. He felt a subtle pressure through the canvas of his chair against his butt and looking down, saw that a large cat was raising its rump to stretch against the bottom of the trans-at. It was a grey on grey tiger striped cat looking very male, and when Waldo put his hand down to caress it it came out from under the chair with a loud growling meow.

“Hurr,” said the cat.

“Her,” repeated Waldo. “So you think she’s the one who attends to everything so well here? Well I guess you’re right, since she’s the boss.”

“Rararow,” said the cat, rubbing its ear against Waldo’s leg.

“Yes,” said Waldo. “Three cheers is right, seeing the attention she obviously gives to every detail. There’s something admirable in that.”

“Murrah.”

“Yes, even morally admirable. Because of the intellectual rigor involved.”

“Wharaoww, wharr, row.”

“Why intellectually rigorous? Well, you know her better than I do, what do you think?” Waldo scratched its head, and it responded by rubbing it against his hand while purring, as if to communicate secrets.

“Ah! So you think she has a gift for attention. You think that attention is the key. You think that most humans don’t have the gift for concentration that almost all cats have. The ability to focus on something and really examine it, probe all its possibilities and even go further to meditate on it with all sentient faculties including seeing hearing feeling smelling tasting and whiskers, all which properly activated belong to a full definition of intellect. You believe that the inability to concentrate is the source of the Freudian idea of repression, which essentially comes out of a diversion of attention from something uncomfortable to think about. So that this is all about levels of attention, you think, a notion which is not at all confined to psychology but to media manipulation, politics, economics, love, and the spiritual dimension of the self which cats are in touch with in an eminently practical way but which humans tend to ignore as too intangible to count for much. So it all comes down to levels of attention, you think, and everything else is bullshit. And you think that some humans nevertheless are in touch with the gift of attention of which you speak? And they are called writers, artists, musicians, and the like, but that they are only in touch in a sadly fragmented and rudimentary way and are focused, like scholars or stock brokers, on their little specialties?”

“Yaoouw.”

“Well I agree with almost everything you say. Except that I think that artists of any kind who are really good are fully in

touch with these faculties, exploring and preserving them for the rest of a mentally crippled humankind until such time as it might awaken to the possibilities of a broader, more efficacious, and more generous consciousness.”

“Wowou.”

“Wow is right. You take my breath away. Of all the folks I’ve talked to this morning you’re the only one who seems very sensible.”

“Mrarr-r-r.”

“You’re welcome.”

Much to Waldo’s surprise, since he was concentrating on his conversation with the cat, the Châtelaine was now standing over his trans-at, her distinguished wrinkles wrinkled with another set of intensely quizzical ones.

“Talking to my cat?” she asked, removing her little pipe from her mouth, the pipe a small sign of her eccentric sense of order. “I’m sure you’ll find him quite reasonable.”

“Oh I do. We’ve had a long and interesting conversation.”

“About what?”

“About philosophy.”

“Truly. He talks with me mostly about food. But, you know, we French, like the Italians, like to talk about food. Speaking of which, lunch is ready.”

“Well,” said Waldo, “I’d like to chat with him again sometime. What’s his name?”

“Chat.”

A la Bastille

(Get Drunk,
Drive Fast)

They were walking across the tree-shaded ivy-trimmed grass-carpeted patch of privilege known as a campus, continuing the discussion that had begun in the Professor's office.

"Assuming it's true," hemmed the Professor, "what you're arguing, that there are no outsiders any more . . ."

"Not so much no outsiders as no outside," corrected Waldo. "You used to be able to exist quite comfortably outside. With a sense of superiority even. You were practically smug about being left out, proud of being attacked by the establishment, it was part of the identity. Now if you're outside you simply don't exist. Because there is no outside. And as soon as your exclusion is noticed, or as soon as you're attacked for not being inside, you are inside. You exist. It's good to be discovered as alternative or transgressive, it's even better to be attacked. It's convertible into dollars. Howard Stern, for example."

"An unfortunate example," said the Professor, absently. "But I assume there are still sides of some sort, even if not in and out."

"Oh, there are sides, I suppose there's even a history of sides. Yours begins with the entry of the Vietnam generation into the Ph.D. mill, I believe," Waldo said vaguely. This wasn't a very interesting discussion and besides, he was busy eyeballing the passing nubility. The campus was aswarm with eminently harassable young women and strapping boys emitting almost tangible hormones. As an occasional young adjunct instructor, Waldo thanked god he had been missed by the local autocastration indoctrination squads.

"That's right," said the Professor. "And history, before it ended, went as follows." The Professor was a founding member of AADD, Academics Against Decadent Deconstruction, but he wasn't really

paying attention because he was thinking about a conference he had just been invited to at the Club Med in French Samoa. Though by now he was able to deliver the party line by rote.

“It was a generation that was peeved with America, and looked to Paris, which at the time was known for its independence from, if not contempt for, the U.S. as the black hole of Western culture. Young American academics were delighted with a new perspective reinforcing a habitual tweedy bossiness long frayed by apparent irrelevance. But it turned out that Boss Tweed was no more immune to fame and fortune than the rest of us. The academic stars from abroad flocked to America for their fifteen minutes, not to mention lucrative lecture fees and textbook sales. Their domestic avatars were soon bragging about high salaries that put them in the income bracket of minor CEOs. Academics of a Marxist persuasion were quick to jump on the Brinks truck. After all, they knew how to play the realpolitik game. Professors of oppressed minorities versed in the new terminology also proved excellent practitioners of Brinksmanship. Excluded women academics who talked the talk were among the first at the trough. The canon exploded—what was in was out and what was out was in. Students were reading books undeservedly ignored and were undeservedly ignorant of books formerly prominent. Did it make any difference? Sure it did—to those who got seats on the gravy train.”

Waldo wasn't taking much of this in. As a regular reader of *The Nation* he wasn't about to buy the point of view of a confirmed Neocon. Instead he was plotting micropolitics with miniskirts. His favorite thing was to methodically seduce as many of the coeds in his classes as possible, the better to politicize them. It was one of the advantages of being a low paid, no-benefit academic temp. Besides, he could double dip by using the seduction adventures in writing pornography to supplement his income. He also liked to get drunk and drive fast.

“Let me pass on to you,” said the Professor, “some academic advice from a distinguished professor of the Old Left given to me as a then novice Neocon. He said, ‘Never mind about creative achievement. You publish your book, you get your student clique, you hike your salary with competing job offers every chance you get. Then you can worry about achievement.’ So you see, it doesn't matter whether you're left or right, you play the same game.”

“That’s cynical,” said Waldo.

“Dear me,” replied the Professor. “There may, or may not, be two sides. Those with steady incomes and those without. It’s a matter of situation. An old anarcho-socialist writer I know, committed to that point of view since he was a teenager, finally had a best seller at the age of fifty-five. First thing he did was to write an article for *The Nation* declaring the end of socialism.”

“Anyway,” said Waldo, “I teach Creative Writing, so I’m not a party to this racket.”

“Creative Writing, exclamation point,” said the Professor. “Creative Writers are the worst. Scratch a poet and a redneck will say ouch. An intellectual redneck, that is. Though novelists are worse than poets. Poets have to claim a certain amount of expertise—novelists take pride in operating out of ignorance.”

“Do I detect a lack of sympathy with the arts?”

“On the contrary. We Neocons may like the good old stuff, but at least we like it. At least we recognize that culture is the matrix for politics. That’s why we always win the culture wars, we’re the only ones interested in winning them. The Lefties always harbor a secret contempt for the arts, because they see them as mystifications of real social issues. There’s nothing so disastrous as a leftist academic theorist in face of a poem, because the theorists have forgotten how to think about poetry and the leftists don’t want to. Anyway, that’s my theory.”

“It’s practice, not theory, that will save the world,” said Waldo.

“Nothing will save the world,” said the Professor.

They had now reached the edge of the scholastic greensward and were crossing into the benighted city—cars, pollution, noise, garbage cans, dog shit, convenience shops, mini-malls, megastores, bad tempers, cross-purposes, hurry, worry, guarded regards, extravagant graffiti.

“Okay, Professor,” said Waldo, “why are we here?”

“I have a proposal,” said the Professor. “I control the purse strings of a certain academic resource, what the vulgar might term a slush fund, in short. And I gather you’re a little strapped for cash.” He looked up inquiringly.

“Always,” responded Waldo.

“The grad assistants and adjuncts are starting a union,” the Professor non sequitured.

“So?”

“I’d like you to join it.”

“Why?”

“Because a union would be inconvenient. Our whole system depends on underpaying teaching assistants.”

“So you want to play hardball?” asked Waldo.

“We couldn’t help notice that you weren’t very sympathetic to the ideology of the organizers.”

“That’s just because I’m not very sympathetic to anything,” explained Waldo. “Doctrine is always baloney.”

“And of course you’d become my assistant,” said the Professor. “With a guaranteed teaching load.”

“It’s not that I have any objection to being an administration fink. It’s just I don’t think we speak the same language,” said Waldo.

“What language do you speak?”

“The same language as these grafitti around us. The nonspecific language of universal discontent.”

“That sounds very literary,” said the Professor.

“When you say the word literature you pull your rank. Literature is just a classy name for a class domination game. Don’t forget I work for a book chain. I sell literature.”

“Which book chain?” asked the Professor.

“Swarms Ignoble. So I know what literature is. It’s a money laundering scheme.”

“How so?”

“Because it doesn’t sell,” said Waldo.

“Then what are all those literary books doing there?”

“Wallpaper,” said Waldo. “They need something to put on the shelves. That’s why book returns to publishers are going up over fifty percent.”

“So what do they sell?”

“Nothing,” said Waldo. “Coffee maybe.”

“Then why are they opening more and more stores?” asked the Professor. “They must be making money.”

“Sales go up profits go down. They operate in the red. You know the old garment industry joke? How do you make a profit if you lose a dollar on every suit you sell? Answer: Volume!”

“You shock me,” said the Professor. “I’m genuinely shocked. Surely literature must be more than this.”

“What you call literature could be more than this,” replied Waldo, “if our critics and academics were capable of subtracting market force from intellectual force in given works, market force in this case equalling form. Only then will you get a literature that frees readers to participate in the realization of the work rather than constraining them to submit to a variety of hypnosis. Also known as willing suspension of disbelief, a ploy based on consensual domination and submission. To deformalize in our socioeconomic context means to deprogram, and deprogramming means reader liberation. So you get them where it counts, in how they read and write and, therefore, think.”

“Surely you’re not an antiformalist?” queried the Professor.

“Form is your foot prints in the sand,” responded Waldo.

“So what’s the point?” asked the Professor.

“The point is that literature is a money laundering scheme. Just like museums and symphony orchestras. Like the opera. Fine art. Ballet. Even jazz clubs. Mostly they don’t make a profit—they’re money losers. Thank god for the Mafia and the Robber Barons. Thank god for the drug cartels. The NEA was just a side show.”

“Can you prove this?”

“If I could prove it I’d be dead. Or worse, accused of bad taste.”

“Maybe we speak the same language after all,” said the Professor. “We Neocons know, though we don’t tell anyone, that taste is always formed by three things. Money, sex, and politics. None of them ever admitted. They’re part of the cultural unconscious. Abstract Expressionism got off the ground because the State Department decided it’d be good propaganda for the American Century. The Beatniks suddenly found themselves headlined in Hearst publications because they were used to signal the shift from a puritan work economy to a hedonist consumer economy. Jerzy Kosinski, who as all but literary morons know couldn’t write his way out of a paper bag without massive help, bamboozled the New York intelligentsia, left and right, with his peculiar concoction of sex and politics until the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* went too far by publishing an outrageous S & M photo of him on its cover.”

“This is getting interesting,” said Waldo. “What do you say we go over to the Swarms Ignoble and coffee stain some books and magazines?”

Over at the Superstore, the Professor waved his hand at the Babel of books around them. “You see this surplus of choice?” he said. “This is free market democracy.”

“Anyone in the book business can tell you,” replied Waldo, “that almost all the books here are produced by a handful of publishers that have cannibalized all the other publishers, and are themselves owned by a teaspoonful of international conglomerates that dominate the entertainment and communication business worldwide. So if you think that Rupert Murdoch and Si Newhouse have the best interests of democracy at heart you’ll continue to sleep soundly.”

“But surely,” said the Professor, “you can find anything you want here.”

“Sure you can. If you know about it. But you won’t know about it because it’s not a matter of the physical ‘product,’ as they call books in the publishing world, it’s a matter of attention. And at best your attention will be directed toward skillful but harmless practitioners like Philip Roth and John Updike. Or at the GenX limit, Tom Robbins. Books that contain what I call a negative political component based not on what’s included but on what isn’t. The cultural unconscious is a composed of what’s left out and therefore doesn’t exist. Now if there were some smart critics around they’d begin probing that unconscious. But I’m not holding my breath.”

“We academics are concerned with deeper issues,” smugged the Professor.

“Maybe,” said Waldo. “But any contemporary literary analysis that doesn’t begin with some consideration of the influence of the late capitalist institutions that produce the books you read—and write—is worse than foolish. Come to think, maybe it’s because they produce the books you write that you prefer to think about deeper issues.”

“This is getting personal.”

“It should. Because the literary-industrial complex that dominates the so-called Humanities is controlled by persons, and you may be one of them. An unconscious lackey, as they used to call them, of the ruling class, as they used to call it.”

“What makes you say ‘unconscious’?” asked the Professor. “We Neocons were not born yesterday.”

“Hey, maybe we are on the same wave length. I think I’ll take you up on that proposition. I’ve always been a union sympathizer. Solid aridity forever!”

“Are we talking maybe coalition politics here?” asked the Professor.

“No. Unless it’s the coalition of mutineers against orthodoxies. Mutiny is my best bet because mutiny is immune to doctrine. A mutiny begins with individuals who are fed up, not with ideologies that are force-fed. A mutiny doesn’t have a program so much as a set of grievances. Its aims beyond that are vague, but that very vagueness may be to its advantage, since beyond specific programs, it undermines the whole range of attitudes that produced the grievances in question. A mutiny is a moving target—because it has no set ideological objectives it mutates so quickly and unpredictably that it’s hard to destroy. A mutiny mobilizes people of many differing political persuasions. Revolutions may begin with mutinies but revolutions either fail, or turn into mirrors of regimes they’ve destroyed, while the subterranean effects of a mutiny on the culture may be enduring. The anti-Vietnam War movement was a mutiny, Paris in sixty-eight was a mutiny, the Civil Rights Movement was a mutiny. So, *à la Bastille!*”