

Cohibitions: On Cultural Refraining

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When I was young, I remember being given tantalising insights into the rather exotic rituals of what I thought of enviously as normal families. Later, I would realise that many children were like me in believing their own family circumstances to be weird and pathological and in their longing to be part of the normal families that they read about in books or saw on television. One of the things that normal families did that we never did was to have people round for dinner (they also had ‘dinner’). Neither happened in our house. We had aunties who sat with their coats on holding cups of tea on their knees, thin-lipped and looking anxious to go. I once heard from one of my friends from, one of these putatively well-adjusted families, about a piece of behaviour that would be expected if there were a particularly large group of dinner guests, or perhaps an unexpectedly small casserole to feed them. ‘FHB’, mother would beam across the table to her children, or big sister hiss in younger brother’s ear: ‘Family Hold Back’.

Holding back has developed a very bad reputation. We tell ourselves that we must learn to avoid or attempt to outwit everything that might hold us back, and should be especially on our guard against all the ways in which we might turn out to be holding ourselves back. Just as one might expect, where the expression ‘holding back’ occurs in titles of recent books, it almost always indicates some undesirable impediment that is to be overcome. An unsorted selection from Amazon: *No Holding Back: The Autobiography*; *What’s Holding You Back?*; *Stop Stopping: How To Finally Break Free Of What’s Holding You Back*; *How to Stop Feeling Like Sh*t: 14 Habits That Are Holding You Back from Happiness*; *Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens: A Workbook to Break the Thought Habits That Are Holding You Back*; *Don’t Bullsh*t Yourself!: Crush the Excuses That Are Holding You Back*; *How Women Rise: Break the 12 Habits Holding You Back*; *No Holding Back: My Story*; *The One Thing Holding You Back: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Connection*; *Myths of Work: The Stereotypes and Assumptions Holding Your Organization Back*; *Moving Past Perfect: How Perfectionism May Be Holding Back Your Kids (and You!) and What You Can Do about It*; *Unfrozen: Stop Holding Back and Release the Real You*; *Rebel Entrepreneur: How to Win The Game of Business and Break Free From What’s Holding You Back*; and (obviously my favourite, given the preceding list) *Invention: Think Different*; *Break Free from the Culture Hell-Bent on Holding You Back*.

In *You Must Change Your Life* (2013), Peter Sloterdijk reports in detail on the many rituals and routines that constitute the programmes of self-formation, or ‘anthropotechnics’ to which in his view all religions amount. Nearly all those forms of apprenticeship or discipleship involve the exercise of what Giorgio Agamben has described as ‘impotentiality’ (Agamben 1999, 182), not doing things or, more precisely, the action of inaction, or refraining from doing things. We are used to thinking of doing

things as a signal feature of human affiliation – eating, talking, playing, working. But human beings are also very drawn to not doing things together.

I am going to call this holding together in holding back *cohibition*. There are only a few English verbs which deploy the Latin *-hibere* stem: the most familiar are *exhibit*, *inhibit* and *prohibit*; to *perhibit*, meaning to esteem, repute or attribute, flared up briefly in the early 1600s, while to *adhibit*, meaning to apply, allow, assign or append had a longer career, but is now a fussy exotic. As so often, one wonders why no uses have ever been found for other possible prepositional prefixes, such as *transhibit*, *dehibit*, *dishibit*, *obhibit*, *subhibit* or *enhibit*, for which no sensible uses seem to have been found; the passing over of *prehibition* seems like a particularly lost opportunity. Latin *-hibere* is a modification of *habere*, to have, and the meanings of this family of words alternative between ideas of owning or holding (to exhibit is to display or hold out) and disowning, or holding back. Perhaps the most interesting exhibit from this family of words is *cohibere*, which conjoins the meanings of holding together and keeping in on the one hand and restraining, restricting, curbing or warding off. Most notably, it is the word used by Lucretius in what would for later generations, and perhaps for many still today, be the most scandalous proposition of the *De rerum natura*, that the mortal soul must diffuse into the air once the containing force of the body is dissolved:

quippe etenim corpus, quod vas quasi constitit eius,
cum cohibere nequit conquassatum ex aliqua re
ac rarefactum detracto sanguine venis,
aere qui credas posse hanc cohiberier ullo,
corpore qui nostro rarus magis incohibescit?

In fact if the body, which is in a way its vessel, cannot contain it, when once broken up by any cause and rarefied by the withdrawal of blood from the veins, how could you believe that it could be contained by any air, which is a more porous container than our body? (Lucretius 3.440-4; 1975, 222-223)

The work of the word *cohibition*, which was used to signify both restraint of impulses and as a medical term for staunching or suppression of bodily flows, appears nowadays to be done by inhibition or prohibition. The latest printed citation supplied by the OED being from an 1882 lexicon of science and medicine, which gives German *Beschränkung* and *Verzähmung* as equivalents to *cohibition*, and offers the following definition of a ‘cohibiting medium’: ‘A substance which prevents the passage of electricity from one body to another when placed between them; the term has the same meaning as isolating medium, with the addition of an idea of activity’ (Power and Sedgwick 1882, n.p.). *Cohibition* is then the inhibition of dissolution in inhabitation. In the seventeenth century, *cohibit* was in fact sometimes used for, or perhaps confused with, *cohabit*, for example in the allegation made in a text of 1661 that, among Persians, ‘men might contract matrimony and cohibit with their Daughters, Sisters, or Mother’ (Pererius 1661, 47). Though *cohibition* has itself almost entirely evaporated from English, I revive it here to suggest the *cohibition* is necessary for *cohabitation*,

where the habit (from *habere*, to have), of inhibiting, abstaining or relinquishing, is what you have, and hold, and thereby what holds you together in and with your habitat. Family Hold Back.

The styling of human actions almost always involves reduction of complexity – to remove all the differentiations of gait involved in ordinary walking for the purposes of marching or processive walking for example, or to bring the ordinarily mobile and mutable body to a state of repose in prayer. Indeed, more than merely one feature of human affiliation among others, action-abstention may be the most important way in which human beings take themselves out of nature or distinguish themselves from other humans. To be sure, human beings assert themselves through aggression and conquest: but it is remarkable how often they also assert themselves through inhibition. Judaism strongly identifies sanctity with withdrawal and renunciation. Holiness is strongly associated in the Pentateuch with *qedûšâ*, or the exercise of spiritual withdrawal, associated in particular with three forms of commandment, involving withdrawal from forbidden foods, ritual impurity, forbidden relations or the practices of Gentiles (Diamond 2004, 76). All of the ten commandments concern prohibitions rather than prescriptions, the only one having a positive form seeming to be ‘remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy’ (Exodus 20.8) – except that ‘keeping it holy’ means keeping it apart from other days by various kinds of ritualised abstention, that is, maintaining its integrity through subtraction.

Human beings are perhaps governed by the resolve articulated in Yeats’s ‘Sailing to Byzantium’: ‘Once out of nature I shall never take/My bodily form from any natural thing’. If human beings for the last few centuries have more and more frequently felt the pressure to fulfil themselves, that fulfilment will always have to depend upon some primary abstention, or *holding away* from creaturely, merely Calibanic existence, eft-nibbled, idly appetitive. Abstention is the means of achieving willed rather than merely given existence. Even cults of naturalness will be driven by the human mania for purification, the cleaving away of the inessential in favour of the essential. The most unfulfillable instruction you will ever hear is to ‘act naturally’, because no natural creature is capable of performing anything approaching an ‘act’, that word which always doubles simple or spontaneous doing with the self-conscious performance of that doing, just as the idea of ‘nature’ is by definition part of the method and apparatus of hoisting oneself out of the in-itself condition of nature.

Human beings are governed by the injunction not to be, and by the often violent recoil from certain primary forms of what we seemingly cannot not be. So: a human being will always be a kind of object in the world: but to be human is not to be, or be taken to be an object. Human beings are a kind of animal: but to be human is to be more or other than an animal, to be, in fact, the only non-animal animal. Human beings refrain and abstain, and can only maintain their understanding of themselves as human in those refrainings and abstentions. Philosophers regularly return problems in the definition of refraining as part of the philosophy of action; though there is little mystery or disagreement about what we mean by refraining, finding a logical description of what it entails proves to be a complex matter (Brand 1971; Moore 1979).

Holding oneself back is twinned with going beyond, and unmaking with remaking. The Greek ἀσκέω, which gives us *ascetic* meant to work or elaborate; though it came to be applied to athletic training or practice, therefore implying the self-denying severity of striving, it could also be used to mean to deck, adorn or ornament. This can lead to paradoxes. Many sects forbid the cutting of hair, as a way of abstaining from the vanity of self-adornment with which the styling of hair is associated. The mode of abstention followed by a Nazirite in Judaism forbade cutting of the hair: ‘All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head: until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth himself unto the Lord, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow’ (Numbers 6.5). Rastafarians observe the same prohibition. Although this belongs to the class of abstentions from social convention that return humans to nature rather than lifting them out of it, this is complicated by evolutionary explanations of why humans uniquely have continuously-growing head-hair, even though they have lost the fur on their bodies. As Alison Jolly suggests,

Truly untended hair implies that the wearer is desperate or insane and, furthermore, has no friends. Pseudo-untended hair signals ritual mourning in some cultures or, more often, cultural revolt (hippy ponytails, dreadlocks). To convey social status or sexual attractiveness it doesn’t matter whether you curl, uncurl, braid, blow-dry, or use powder or mud: The signal is that somebody has clearly done something to the bits round the back. (Jolly 2005, 5)

So when it comes to head hair, untended and intended are in fact equivalent, since the ‘natural’ function of head hair is to be able to be unruly and therefore available for styling: ‘Coiffure and coiffure-demanding genes could be at least as old as *Homo sapiens*’ (Jolly 2005, 5). Abstention from style is therefore as much of a hair signal as the most elaborate plait. In this respect, at least ‘culture’ is part of ‘nature’ as far as humans are concerned.

It seems as though in the case of the Nazirites, hair may participate in the preservation-destruction ambivalence that characterises the sacred. Building on the suggestion that the Nazirites may on occasion have been called on to shave their hair in order to make ritual sacrifice of it, Elizier Diamond offers the following explanation:

The essence of the Nazirite vow is that by means of consecrating one’s hair for a certain period and then offering it on the altar, one symbolically offers oneself to God, and in doing so one is both offering and officiant. Once one has dedicated one’s hair to the altar, it follows as a matter of course that it may not be shorn, for this would constitute the misappropriation of sancta. (Diamond, 2004, 108)

Edmund Leach offers another suggestion, which hinges on the separability of the hair from the body:

the social anthropologist is concerned with the publicly acknowledged status of social persons and he notices that ritual acts in which part of the individual’s body is cut off are prominent in *rites de passage*, that is to say ‘rites of

separation' in which the individual publicly moves from one social position to another. (Leach 1958, 162)

On this reading, one might suggest (though it is not a suggestion Leach himself makes) that the hair is not preserved or renounced because of what it might specifically stand for (life, soul, the penis, etc), but because it embodies separability itself, and thus the condition of being able to live with and in loss. In social life one is a part of a system of apartness. The symbolism both of giving way and giving away allows one to keep what one loses and lose what one keeps. It is what imparts sweetness to the sorrow of parting.

Rituals of separation do not merely follow the partitive logic of *pars pro toto*, as Leach describes it (Leach 1958, 150), they are in some sense about acts of parting, in which all partition rituals participate. Shaving is often associated with mourning, and also with transition from one state to another, thus leaving an earlier condition behind, even as shaving can seem to turn the clock back to a purer, more uniform time. It seems apt that the two primary operations on which humans perform variations with the hair humans are twisting and parting. Leach alludes to the *Śimantōnnayanam* ceremony practised in South India, in which a husband parts the hair of a woman in her 4th, 6th, or 8th month of pregnancy:

The husband stands facing his wife, and holding in his right hand a quill of porcupine with branch of Udumbara *Ficus racemosa* (Atthi leaves) and parts her hair, beginning from the middle of her forehead leading backwards; this he repeats thrice chanting, "May Rākā (Full Moon) listen to my prayers; may she help me to carry out this ceremony without any defect or omission, and bless me with a male child endowed with praiseworthy qualities, with valour and generosity." (Iyer 1928, 372)

Leach insists on the overtness of the symbolism: 'parting the hair = parting the genitals in parturition' (Leach 1958, 155).

The ambivalence of hair is that, as the barber says in the sad, sinister haircutting scene in the Coen Brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), that, like time itself, 'it just keeps coming'. You cannot go back in time, because time itself keeps on coming back, to come apart from itself. Time is what divides us from ourselves and from each other, just as, according to Michel Serres, on a much larger scale, the grand narrative of human history is made up through and through of the tragic agony of partings, divergences and desertions, recapitulating the primal departure into being in the event of birth, and anticipating the departure from being of death. Rituals of passage seem to hold us together in those partings, making it possible for departing into and departing from to be experienced as being-in-departure.

There is a growing curiosity in a number of different fields about the nature of refraining, and, in particular the question of whether it should be viewed as an action or a simple omission of action – a non-action, or inaction, as might be said. It looks as though pigeons find performing an action more absorbing than refraining from that

action, so much so that time seems to pass more quickly for them when they doing something than when they are not doing it, even when they have been trained to perform both actions, so that the not-doing may be regarded as instrumental.

Is the abstaining in abstinence the same as the abstaining in abstention? Yes, in one sense, since one may be said to abstain in both circumstances. But the sense of abstain is in fact different in either case. In the case of abstaining, I must have a wish to do something I nevertheless refrain from. In the case of abstention, I may have such a wish, but need not. I may abstain from voting on a particular question precisely because I do not have any feelings one way or the other about it. It would be very odd to call this abstinence. In the case of abstinence there is work to be done, in overcoming or deciding against the fulfilment of a desire. In the formulation offered by Brandon Johns, '[t]here is a distinction between not-doing and refraining: refraining is a special case of not-doing that requires work on the agent's behalf' (Johns 200p, 214). In the case of abstention, such work may indeed be done (I may be strongly drawn to an action which, because I also believe it to be wrong, I nevertheless do not endorse), but need not necessarily be done. In the case of abstention, I can abstain indifferently, or indeed precisely out of indifference: this is not possible in the case of abstinence.

The external conditions seem relevant. Abstaining relates to any kind of action to which we might be drawn. Abstention relates to the specific action of indicating a preference or performing an action that amounts to the indication of a preference. Actually, abstention is usually in fact the indication of a preference for not committing oneself to a preference. Abstinence is an action, abstention is a statement.

The difference between the two modes, or even moods, of abstaining, is significant for the purpose and method of this book. Abstaining in the sense of positively refraining from an action (drinking, smoking, eating meat, taking revenge) is a more positive action than abstaining from making a choice. It is not that the second kind of abstaining is not itself definite, even definitive, for it certainly is, and in some ways can seem even more positive than refraining in the sense of self-denial (for one thing it may take place in public, and may involve resisting quite a lot of pressure from one's peers, in the case where only one more vote is needed to carry or defeat a motion, for example). But abstinence is more positive than abstention in the sense that it is more intensely polarised. The abstinence-abstainer refuses what the abstention-abstainer merely declines. There is more tension in abstinence than in abstention, as you pull away from what you feel pulled towards. Abstinence makes a choice, where abstention declines to make a choice. There can therefore be abstinence in abstention, for it may be a way of austerely denying an impulse to make a particular kind of choice, but this is not a necessary condition of it.

The ending of Kafka's 'The Hunger Artist' might dramatise the difference. As usually understood, the self-starver would be an abstinent abstainer, who would deny themselves something they wanted. But Kafka's hunger artist can be indifferent to food, because he has never found any they liked.

“I always wanted you to admire my fasting,” said the hunger artist. “But we do admire it,” said the supervisor obligingly. “But you shouldn’t admire it,” said the hunger artist. “Well then, we don’t admire it,” said the supervisor, “but why shouldn’t we admire it?” “Because I have to fast. I can’t do anything else,” said the hunger artist. “Just look at you,” said the supervisor, “why can’t you do anything else?” “Because,” said the hunger artist, lifting his head a little and, with his lips pursed as if for a kiss, speaking right into the supervisor’s ear so that he wouldn’t miss anything, “because I couldn’t find a food that tasted good to me. If had found that, believe me, I would not have made a spectacle of myself and would have eaten to my heart’s content, like you and everyone else.” Those were his last words, but in his failing eyes there was still the firm, if no longer proud, conviction that he was continuing to fast.

Kafka’s hunger artist is forced to abstain from eating as an act of as it were proudly impassioned indifference, in other words as a principled abstention rather than an abstinence. He does not fast through wanting not to eat, like a mystic, anorexic or a performer determined to show their powers of endurance, but rather simply through not wanting to eat anything that might be available to him. This distinction is not new in the modern world. Caroline Walker Bynum points to the similar distinction made in the medieval world between inability to eat and asceticism, as indicated by the fact that holy abstainers from food such as John the Good of Mantua and Columba of Rieti sometimes exhibited their capacity to eat before audiences: that is ‘[t]he very fact that ... they *could* eat - i.e., that their abstinence was voluntary – suggests that medieval interpreters drew a clear distinction between inability to eat and asceticism’ (Bynum 1987, 196).

In Kafka’s German, the hunger artist tells the supervisor ‘ich hungern muß, ich kann nicht anders’. The German verb *hungern* preserves an ambiguity that is tidied up in English, by separating into different words the action of fasting from the condition of being hungry. It is not that the hunger artist is not hungry, only that he is not hungry for anything that might ever satisfy it. English does however have the phrase ‘go hungry’, which might seem adapted to the case of Kafka’s abstainer.

I call this *abstition*, because there seems to be no neutral word that does not incline one way or the other – to the positive pulling back of abstinence, or the more neutral standing aside of abstention. Abstition might name the peculiar kind of standing possessed by a standing aside.

Though individuals mark themselves off from their communities in abstention, abstention is often practised in common. Taboos and prohibitions define communities. ‘We of the kangaroo clan voluntarily but irrevocably refrain in perpetuity from kangaroo-bothering’ Selective eating prohibitions are much subtler and more powerful than sexual prohibitions, precisely because refraining from eating altogether invariably leads to the cessation of existence, but it is possible to make a prohibitive cut within the field of eating itself, by denying oneself certain kinds of sinful, unclean or enfeebling food. The result is to turn appetite into a willed action,

tendency into intention. Dietary codes seem rarely to be based on a theory of what it might be positively good to eat; human beings are much more strongly motivated by aversive theories of what they should avoid or deny themselves. It is other peoples who are defined by what they messily and unchoosily put into their mouths (Frogs, Krauts): 'we' are defined by what we avoid eating. For all their admiration of the wild predator, many senior Nazis followed Hitler in being vegetarian, thereby, according to Boria Sax, affirming their elite status: 'Throughout most of history only elites could eat meat on a regular basis, but only elites could readily afford to refuse it' (Sax 2000, 35). The contemporary problem of anorexia nervosa may be seen as an intensification of a systematic assertion of power through selective self-denial which humans have almost universally sought to give themselves.

Peter Sloterdijk gives fasting altogether a special place in his arguments for the importance of what he calls 'ascetology' in human projects of self-formation:

It [fasting] is not an artistic discipline like any other; it is the metaphysical discipline *par excellence*. From time immemorial it has been the exercise by which, if it succeeds, the ordinary human who is subject to hunger learns – or observes in others – how one can beat nature at its own game. The fasting of ascetics is the skilled form of the lack that is otherwise always experienced passively and involuntarily. This triumph over need is only accessible to [70-1] those who are assisted by a great need: when the old master ascetics say that hunger for God or enlightenment must overrule every other desire if it is to be sated, they are presupposing a hierarchy of privations. (Sloterdijk 2013, 70-1)

'Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh', Jews are enjoined (Leviticus 19.28): I have always thought this particular injunction belonged among the class of spontaneously self-prohibiting behaviours, along with 'Ye shall not plunge thy hand into boiling water' and 'Ye shall not precipitate thyself from the top of a block of flats'. It is a little like the Eddie Izzard routine which imagines the Anglican church offering its believers a choice of Cake or Death, leaving the inquisitor puzzled about why nobody seems to choose death ('we're going to run out of cake at this rate'). But, as Freud wisely observes of the incest taboo, there is no point in prohibiting something unless somebody somewhere wants to do it. After all, one of the delicious temptations held out by the Evil One to Christ in the wilderness was precisely to make the jump.

Like many collective relations, the relation between abstinence and collectivity is reversible. Abstaining from things is demanding (that of course being a large part of the point), and being part of a community of abstainers, whether nuns, teetotallers, vegans or kosher Jews, can help spread the cognitive and emotional load. But for this reason, a shared project of self-denial can in itself create and sustain what may be called an abstentive collectivity. The function of the abstention then becomes to create and sustain the group, rather than membership of the group helping its members stick at the abstention. Indeed, one might say that the capacity for abstentive control of impulses and appetites would be likely to be selected for among members of a group

in which setting aside ego-claims in favour of cooperation is at a premium. 'Refusal is social and affiliative', as Carole McGranahan has observed (McGranahan 2016, 322).

In its active mode, abstinence takes the form of sacrifice. What abstinence gives up, sacrifice gives away; sacrifice is to abstinence as voiding is to avoidance. In Roman life, the person or object who was *sacer* could be both holy and accursed, the logic being that they were set aside for the gods, either to consume or to punish. In a similar way, when Cain is driven out and condemned to be 'a fugitive and a vagabond' for the murder of his brother, and complains to God that 'it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me' (Genesis 4.14), God responds in a sort of good news-bad news way by marking him out as reserved for his personal retribution alone: 'And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him' (Genesis 4.15). The category of the sacred is the reserved, that which is removed from ordinary kinds of transaction and exchange, including that of being thought about, pushing it in a sense toward the condition of being a non-category. To keep something sacred is to abstain not only from handling it, but even from reflecting on it, in particular in the form of handling constituted by language. Thus, one is enjoined in certain religions not to profane with utterance the name of God, or, as used commonly to be the case, someone would be said to have (voice dropping to a whisper and mouth forming a large mime) '*Cancer*'. But the reservation of the sacred is always liable to be compromised in the form of the secret, which must be told, or at least tellable, in order to be kept. Samuel Beckett's *Come and Go* acts out a ceremonial ring-a-roses of secrets imparted and constrained between three women, each of whom whispers to another the sorrow of the third, unknown to that third. The final image of the play is of an auld-lang-syne joining of hands, in an image of how formative of old acquaintance epistemic abstinence can be (Beckett 1986, 354-5).

Hillis Miller puts the principle of what he calls refraining at the centre of the work of Jacques Derrida. The particular thing that Derrida refrains from is joining or belonging, whether to clan, family, or institution. My aim here is to show that refraining is in fact, and necessarily, the most powerfully cohesive force in any kind of human group. If we are monads it is because we catch the infection of singularity from our belonging, a belonging that can henceforth only ever be a community of those who must hold back from being or having everything in common, and yet whose community is formed from the aggregation of these abstinences, constituted as the convergence of these abstentions. Miller recognises that this impossibility of genuine intimacy is general, so that Derrida's is just the 'singular form, *his* form, of the general human situation of not having to be one of the family, of having an urgent obligation not to be one of the family. My obligation to respond without mediation to the wholly other' (Miller 2007, 292). But he does not seem to recognise the ethical bond that this aggregated abstention constitutes.

We may be able to understand the collectivising force of shared abstinence through reflection on a quality like 'continence' (literally 'holding together' rather than 'holding away'), which suggests a view of society as constituted on the model of an individual

human body. Human beings seem powerfully drawn to a conception of the health of individual bodies in terms of an economy on the one hand of containment (of strength, energy, vital force, heat, etc.) and on the other of purgation, the channelling away of invasive or vitiating matter (excrement, mucus, pus, and so on). It is this economy that suggests the way in which the giving out of impurity can contribute to the sense of the collectivity as held together by an energy of self-containment, making giving up a means of holding in.

A collective abstention is to be distinguished from an abstentive collectivity. The former may be unreflective and unselfconscious, a simple pattern of behaviour rather than a symbolic affirmation of identity - for example in a simple preference for certain foods over other ignored foods, or the belief that it is natural for all humans to avoid certain objects or practices, to distinguish themselves from plants or other animals. An abstentive collectivity by contrast differentiates itself not primarily from natural existence but also from other groups of humans. It consequently has an agonistic purpose, which is amplified if it forms part of a regime of physical training, in preparation for attack or defence.

Abstention can be homeostatic or dynamic. It is homeostatic if it is in accordance with a theory that human beings must in course of things observe certain limits or prohibitions in order to keep danger at bay or keep themselves in being. It is dynamic if it forms part of a narrative of reparative or projective self-transformation, to undo, for example, some damage or deficit in the human condition, or some weakness into which other humans may have fallen. Arguments in favour of vegetarianism often deploy this idea of a fall into savagery and the necessity for human beings ethically to remake themselves through an undoing or reengineering of their corrupting appetite for meat. [Porphyry, Shelley] The idea of civilisation, achieved through the 'civilising process' and the work of self-culture, at an individual and collective level, both of which depend on ever more complex networks of growth-through-prohibition, involves just this kind of projective structure.

This suggests that abstention may have a role in the formation of a temporal economy, in which past, present and future are bound together by a rhythm of privation in the expectation of reward. This is especially the case with dietary abstention, which may be regarded as an engineering of a natural rhythm of appetitive depletion and abstinent repletion, often keyed into the rhythms of wakefulness and sleep. In many religions, fasting is required before a ritual or festival, marking the suspension of *chronos* or customary time. Abstaining from sex before marriage structures the individual life course in a similar way, while also coordinating it with the reproductive demands of a society. An apparent aberration like the popularity of 'spiritual marriage' or sexual abstinence in wedlock in the medieval world is a perverse confirmation of the relation between indulgence and prohibition that exists in the institution of marriage (Elliott 1993, 17). Abstention in this temporal perspective becomes a means not just of affirming the longevity of a collectivity – we have never eaten purple fruits and never will – but also of controlling the future through acts of self-discipline. The regimes of self-famishing whereby prophets and shamans may encourage or enable

the access of visionary knowledge provide one example of this subordinating of futurity through magical self-mastery. It is even more clearly indicated in the acts of collective ordeal, inhibition and self-humiliation that are practised by some religions.

Actions of abstinence may be permanent, but are much more potent when they are tied to time, and thus used to give tension to temporal extension. Given specific measures in time, abstentions themselves become measures of time. Thus, one is enjoined to fast for certain designated periods, the beginnings and endings of which are carefully specified (sunset and sunrise, forty days and nights), in order to allow for synchronisation. A hunger strike always has a temporal endpoint, even if it is death.

The action of collective fasting remains a feature of Judaism and Islam, and what may be seen as ambivalent festivals of fasting were a feature of Christian observance across Europe up to the Reformation. Rather than abandoning fasting, Protestantism attempted to harness and intensify its cohering force by making it episodic rather than calendrical, thereby tying it to the intensity of crisis. The function of public fast-days was 'to instil in the populace a due sense of "humiliation" ', understood as 'the acquiring of an awareness of the insignificance and unworthiness of mankind when compared to God, and a recognition that misfortune was the entirely deserved product of human sinfulness' (Durstun 1972, 134). National days of fasting and humiliation were called in England during plague epidemics in 1563 and 1593, as well as in 1588 during the Armada emergency (Durstun 1972, 129). But releasing rituals of abstention and humiliation for the calendar also made for fissile outbreaks of potentially uncontrollable piety, as well as the opportunity to assign the blame for reverses on the actions of the authorities. Charles I attempted both to regulate the timing and conduct of days of fasting and to use them to focus national loyalty at the beginning of rebellion in 1641 (Durstun 1972, 131-2).

We are often informed nowadays about the kinds of 'national humiliation' that may flow from military defeat, loss of territory and power, economic decline, or other reverses. It has become a standard view that the humiliation of defeated Germany by the victorious powers after the First World War created the conditions for the rise of Nazism. The potency of the shared history or prospect of humiliation has often been exploited by regimes wishing to legitimise themselves. Shane Strate describes the 'National Humiliation' discourse that arose in Thailand following the revolution of 1932 which ended the rule of the absolute monarchy and the establishment of a series of military governments. Despite the proud claim that Thailand was never colonised, unlike most of its neighbours, the discourse inflected the history of relations between Thailand and the West as 'a series of emasculating encounters' (Strate 2015, 6), which needed to be made redeemed by a more assertive attitude towards the West. The painful 'memory' of humiliation (hardly anybody ever has anything that could count as what is called 'memory' in historical matters) has been used as a justification and motivation for the thrusting off of colonial domination in many former colonies. Humiliation has been used as a means of gathering energy and commitment in decolonising struggles, for example in the 'National Humiliation Day' that Ghandi

declared in 1919 to encourage demonstrations against British colonialism (Callahan 2004, 203).

China continues to keep alive the idea of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ it suffered from defeat by Britain in the Opium Wars of 1842 and 1860 through to the Japanese invasion in the Second World War. The Century of Humiliation has been repeatedly declared to have come to an end, by Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong following the Second World War through to the current regime, even as each new declaration of its ending extends the humiliation beyond the 1839-1949 century. T.W.A. Callahan writes that ‘the master narrative of modern Chinese history is the discourse of the century of national humiliation’ (Callahan 2004, 204). The four characters *Wuwan guochi* ‘Never Forget National Humiliation’ reappear constantly in images and ceremonies of remembrance (Wang 2012). As Callahan writes, ‘Humiliation is something that [202-3] you suffer, rather than promote. But in China ... humiliation is not just about passive “victimization.” National humiliation discourse involves a very active notion of history and recovery’ (Callahan 2004, 202-3).

National days of fasting, prayer and humiliation continued to be declared in the USA and Britain through the nineteenth century and beyond. Such days were either to encourage thanksgiving or at a time of calamity or threat. The logic seems to be that an act of self-humbling ought to purchase some remission of misfortune. By 1901, when William Maclagan, the Archbishop of York, called for a National Day of Humiliation, to improve Britain’s fortunes in the South African War, it had come to seem a somewhat superstitious practice. G.K. Chesterton responded with a column in which he protested against the absurdity of this ‘access of unreal humility’ (Chesterton 1901, 67). He was stung in particular by the sordidness of the temporising which deployed self-abnegation as a way of currying favour with the Almighty:

If they do not think their views just, they have been following with every kind of moral bravado and insolence an unjust course. If they do think it just, they are calmly proposing publicly to humiliate justice because it does not prosper. In either case they are guilty of that darkest and oldest form of snobbishness, a cosmic snobbishness. (Chesterton 1901, 67)

The work of prohibition is so ingrained in human beings, and in human being, that the very act of prohibition may retroactively create the desire to transgress it, thereby sustaining and even intensifying the prohibition’s own necessity. And this is surely because man’s first disobedience consists not in breaking a rule, but in the very act of self-prohibition or imagining himself prohibited from having a spontaneous unregulated existence. To prohibit is to disobey, or make oneself an exception to norm of non-prohibition. For human beings, mere being is no kind of life at all. In order to be human, it is necessary to create a superego who will perform on our behalf the necessary work of prohibiting (do not eat). The human is himself, like Goethe’s Mephistopheles, ‘der Geist der stets beneint’. Creaturely existence is existence as merely, vulgarly given. One comes to awareness of oneself just in time to realise it is too late, when one has been in a state of unwilled and unreflective existence for a long

time. Every effort to grasp and live out the conditions of one's real existence involves a refusal of that will-less state of being. To be is not to be.

This kind of purification can even extend to the idea of the divine, in that most mystical form of abstention known as apophatic theology, which promises that, since God must be far beyond all powers of human comprehension, such that it is not possible to predicate anything truly of God, the only sure way to approach the divine is through willing abstention from all the ways of thinking that might most naturally occur to one in respect of the divinity, in an ongoing taking away of the thought that you first thought of. It will also enjoin the cultivation of a mode of speech that will deprecate everything that the very act of articulation seems to assume and require, following the principle announced in the word *apo-phasis*, unspeaking or speaking away, rather than speaking out, abloquy in place of eloquence. This is, of course, the tallest of tall orders, but that is only appropriate for an intellectual exercise which may be seen, not so much as an approach to the divine through denial, as a deification of the passion for denial that humans hold so dear, or the apotheosis of abstention itself.

One of the ways in which groups of modern human beings have tried to assert collective will and the possibility of new forms of political being is through the collective withdrawal from productive labour in the strike. The essence of the strike is contained in the phrase 'industrial action', leading to the venerable but seemingly unwearied appearance of jokes about industrial *inaction* haha. A strike is often a sudden access of action, often marking a change in an existing arrangement, or a new beginning – as in striking up a tune, or striking out. A political or industrial strike, used in this sense since the later eighteenth century, draws from the range of meanings in which to strike means to unfix, close down or take apart, as in striking camp, or striking a theatrical set, or what was known as 'striking work' at the end of the day. Earlier uses were often transitive, so that discontented employees would be said from the 1890s to strike their employer: the separation of the action from its object in the condition of 'being on strike', or the elaborated periphrasis 'taking strike action against' may be a way of registering the somewhat odd mixture of action and inaction, purpose and refraining, involved in industrial striking.

In an ever-more tightly-integrated world of shared and interlocking responsibilities and expectations, the traditional means for effecting shifts of power, namely armed uprising, is far too readily absorbed into the scheme of things. Human beings have been practising armed violence for so long that being a professional killer (soldier) has been for centuries a perfectly respectable not to say admired way for somebody to make a living. A strike, by contrast, promises transformation precisely through its systematic refusal to participate in any kind of inherited or customary arrangement. This principle is articulated with a kind of perverse brilliance in Georges Sorel's 'myth of the general strike' as articulated in his *Reflections on Violence* (1908). Sorel realised that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, before any socialist revolutions had been successfully effected, the idea of socialism had already become a kind of second nature, embedded in grimly plausible programmes of social improvement. What was needed was a purified and purifying idea of political action, that could be negatively

distinguished from every kind of practical programme. In a melding of Marxism with Bergsonian mysticism, based on intuition rather than reason, Sorel insisted that only a general strike, that is a refusal of everything that might form part of accepted orderings and understandings of social life, could leave this piecemeal logic properly in pieces.

So it was important for Sorel that one did not waste time weighing the methods and likely political outcome of the strike: 'Myths must be judged as a means of acting on the present; all discussion of the method of applying them as future history is devoid [116-17] of sense. *It is the myth in its entirety which is alone important*' (Sorel 1999, 116-17). In admirably strict conformity with these principles, Sorel abstains from telling us anything at all about what a general strike might consist of, or how it would perform its work. He does, however, devote quite a lot of time to arguing what it is not – why it does not encourage the petty jealousies and desires for vengeance characteristic of ordinary political life, for example (Sorel 1999, 158-9). The action of abstaining from all action and deflection from all definition is powerful, according to Sorel, because it is spiritual rather than practical, and 'awakens in the depth of the soul a sentiment of the sublime proportionate to the conditions of a gigantic struggle' (Sorel 1999, 159). The Sorelian flame is kept crackling in the work of Slavoj Žižek, who similarly urges that revolutionaries should refrain apophatically from ever entering into the vulgar game of trying to spell out the likely gains of political action.

Sorel's brilliance is in realising how powerfully cohering systematic abstention has always been for human beings. Strikes, even among academics, turn out to be even harder work than working, not least because you are not getting paid (unless you are in a profession where it is so hard to tell where and when you are actually at work that strikers need to declare themselves to be on strike as a point of honour, a discipline less than universally observed). There are picket-lines to be manned, for much longer than regular working hours, pamphlets and manifestoes to be promulgated, marches and demonstrations to be coordinated, confrontations with the authorities to be engineered in order for strikers to be arrested and impassioned campaigns for their release set in train, and, increasingly nowadays in our epistemocratic era, pop-up open-air academies of political theory organised. Nothing can give human beings a more festival sense of common purpose than collective abstention. Indeed, Sorel is on to this too, and points to the prodigious productive power of mobilisation possessed by the idea of a general strike:

[T]he idea of the general strike, constantly rejuvenated by the sentiments provoked by proletarian violence, produces an entirely epic state of mind and, at the same time, bends all the energies of the mind towards the conditions that allow the realization of a freely functioning and prodigiously progressive workshop; we have thus recognized that there is a strong relationship between the sentiments aroused by the general strike and those which are necessary to bring about a continued progress in production. We have then the right to maintain that the modern world possesses the essential motivating power

which *can* ensure the existence of the morality of the producers. (Sorel 1999, 250)

Striking borrows from the drive to sanctify or set apart found in festivals, holidays or the elaborate provisions for the sabbath found in Judaism and Christianity. Giorgio Agamben finds in such regulated suspensions of time – that both govern time and yet are held outside it – a principle that he calls ‘inoperativity’, which is ‘not mere inertia or abstention; it is, rather, a sanctification, that is to say, a particular modality of acting and living’ (Agamben 2011, 104).

Many things are subject to inhibition, even inhibition itself. Aggression is met with inhibition. But inhibition can itself become a form of aggression – the aggressive policing of female self-exhibition, for example. Or, according to one version of the repressive hypothesis, it can produce aggression indirectly, by damming up legitimate desires, which are bound to overflow in explosive forms. Under these circumstances, inhibition must itself be inhibited, sometimes allegedly leading to the paradoxical outcome described by Marcuse as ‘repressive desublimation’.

So substantial are the payoffs of inhibition, amounting, once one includes the effects of the accumulation of capital through the inhibition of expenditure, almost to the entire material fabric of human civilisation, that it would be surprising if the practice of inhibition did not often lead to magical fantasies of omnipotence. The inhibition of libido in the celibate and the anorexic can lead to addictive forms of the libido of inhibition, in the intoxication of the apparently limitless sense of self-overcoming power suggested by the capacity to deny appetite. In such cases the libidinal gratifications provided through the denial of libido become autonomous, displacing the forms of long-term spiritual or social gain that self-denial is traditionally supposed to deliver. The psychosocial work both of sexuality and of revenge depends on this economy of intensifying self-limitation.

It may be that in staking so much on the power of self-limitation or inhibition, human beings are recognising the evolutionary importance of the principle of self-control in making it possible for intelligent, but ferociously aggressive creatures like primates to live in large social groups. There seems good reason for believing that, as Patrick McNamara suggests, ‘[i]f individuals can derive real benefits (e.g., a larger “return” later) by learning to inhibit current appetitive or consummatory impulses, then natural selection would favour those individuals with the ability to delay gratification of impulses’ (McNamara 1999, 66). McNamara also connects the ability to inhibit distracting impulses to the capacity to concentrate on analytic and deliberative behaviour, as well as to deceive, since ‘[d]eception of others and of self might ... have been one of the evolutionary sources of the exceptional inhibitory powers associated with modern humans’ (McNamara 1999, 68). We are accustomed to the thought that high intelligence and the demands of living among other highly intelligent conspecifics requires the capacity to make complex connections between ideas and impulses; but it also requires remarkable inhibitory powers. Not only is the capacity for inhibition of violent or aggressive behaviour necessary for life in complex groups, it is also necessary

within individuals, so that ‘inhibitory abilities became powerful enough to make complicated cognitive processing possible by protecting against even high-level mental interference effects such as irrelevant memories, images, fantasies, and emotions’ (McNamara 1999, 69).

One of the most important of the forms of structuring inhibition in human life is the incest taboo, which in general terms is almost universal among humans, if highly variable in the specific forms it may take. Robin Fox has connected the incest taboo to what might be called the inhibitive drive in human societies. The unexpectedness of the idea of a drive to, or instinct of inhibition is part of his argumentative point, since we tend to look for causes of things we do not like, such as divorce or dementia, but remain oddly incurious about the causes of things we do like, like marriage or memory (Fox 1994, 76). Fox is unconvinced by the explanation that the inhibition of sexuality or aggression is a matter of something called ‘culture’ intervening in the state of nature, since what is called culture is so obviously natural, or in no intelligible sense non-nature. The *explanans* here is in fact the *explanandum*, for what the hypothesis of culture leaves entirely unexplained is why the all-explaining thing called culture should have evolved at all.

For Fox, the capacity to inhibit aggressive and other impulses should itself be seen as instinctive. As Freud among others suggested, inhibition rarely acts simply to squash aggressive impulses. Instead it works obliquely by diverting or reassigning such impulses, in particular through processes of ritualization – for which the analogy among primates and other animals are actions like display and exhibition. ‘Behind this propensity to ritualize, especially in *Homo sapiens*, lies the innate ability to inhibit our basic limbic emotional drives’ Fox writes (Fox 1994, 79). *Homo sapiens* is to be understood as

an animal whose evolving brain was as concerned with the *inhibition* as with the *facilitation* of aggression, and perhaps even more so. It was not that “animal aggression” was absent; it was still very much in evidence. It was that in man the aggression was constantly being monitored by consideration of delayed gratification: *aggression postponed was dominance gained*. The aggression still had to be there and easily “turned on” for the dominance struggle to be effective. But it had to be just as easily “turned off” so that the animal did not make foolish moves and spoil its chances (as is the case with the hyperaggressive animals who end up wounded, dead, or exiled). (Fox 1994, 79)

The biosocial or, as it has later tended to be called, sociobiological explanation for the capacity to inhibit impulses is that it makes possible the cooperative behaviour among complex groups that is necessary for human survival and success.

The real “causal” question here then is not why so many young males act so violently. This is digestion: it just happens as long as the appropriate stimuli (the analogs of food) are fed in (females, other males, resources). The real causal question is how so many cultures manage through initiation,

intimidation, sublimation, bribery, education, work, and superstition to stop them and divert their energy elsewhere. (Fox 1994, 92)

In a certain sense, we might suggest that this provides a general account of the function of culture, as embodied principally in the capacity to symbolise: culture is just the name for the ensemble of symbolic actions, actions that are not quite actions, or are more than the mere actions they seem to be, that humans use to inhibit violence. Apart from anything else, this makes sense of the otherwise odd-seeming fact that the primatologist (and painter) Desmond Morris, author of *The Naked Ape*, was for a short time director of London's Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Abstention and inhibition are effected through symbolic means, most particularly the richest symbolic means available to humans, language. If this is true, it makes it unsurprising that language itself should be the vehicle and subject of inhibition. Gilbert Herdt remarks that, not only are all human societies concerned with the regulation of sexuality, they are also concerned with the regulation of how sexuality is represented: 'all of them, past and present, exert cultural, political, economic and even psychological controls over how people talk about sex: when, where, with whom and why – not why are motivated, but why they must be stopped from sexual discourse' (Herdt 2011, 259).

Not only are secret societies common in many times and places, many societies seem to depend upon the keeping of certain kinds of secret – the sacred, for example, being understood in many cultures as that which should not be enquired into or spoken about. Most academic writing about silence, in common with writing about refraining, restraint and holding back of all kinds, tends to assume that the imposing of silence is an impediment or violation, meaning that silence should ideally in all circumstances be broken. Peter H. Stephenson has suggested, by contrast, that the ability to keep silence may literally have often been a matter of life and death for early humans. As Stephenson observes, '[t]he most essential feature of human control over limbic vocal responses is the ability to not vocalize at all under conditions which elicit involuntary response on the part of other Primates' (Stephenson 1980, 49) – that is, when a jaguar or SS officer is a few feet away. The development of systems of inhibition that could override the impulses promoted by the limbic system may have allowed for the silencing of the spontaneous cries that would announce one's presence to a predator. For similar reasons, it is also the case that the ability to keep silent is also a great advantage in hunting. Noisy animals usually have few predators – and domesticated animals tend to vocalise more (our cat Leila lived wild before inveigling herself into our household, and was almost silent for a long time before we succeeded in teaching her how to miaow in approved feline fashion). This leads Stephenson to the speculation that

Sound generated by species may then be grossly understood as inversely proportional to the amount of pressure exerted upon that species by predators. Under great pressure by predators, the inhibition of not only random vocalization, but of an entire emotion laden involuntary call system may have

been highly adaptive. Given current data on the predation by leopards on *Australopithecus robustus* I would suggest that such conditions obtained in the past for antecedent human chronospecies. Furthermore I would suggest that rather than rendering the evolution of language impossible, the increased demand in terms of natural selection for individuals who could remain silent may have been precisely that which allowed for the evolution of language ultimately to take place. The development of a prefrontal lobe which is generally associated with inhibition and the consequent increase in cortical-cortical pathways coupled with the relative reduction in cortical-limbic pathways may stem from conditions where individuals who were able to keep silent were selected for, while those who could not became evolutionary casualties. (Stephenson 1980, 49-50)

As Stephenson observes, one of the most important things about speech is the fact that it incorporates silence: ‘The sonic and aphonic are poles existing in one overall medium of communication for neither can exist without the other as the source of its own definition. Speech involves the controlled use of silence and silence can only exist as an absence of what is recognized as sound’ (Stephenson 1980, 52). One might go a little further than Stephenson and suggest that where the emotional-laden calls of the limbic-vocal system are either fully on, or fully off, speech can be on and off at the same time, because speech includes, exploits and even depends on ‘intraplionic’ silence. Indeed, many forms of speech can themselves be forms of call-inhibition, or *unsayings*: ‘whatever you say, say nothing’, as the Seamus Heaney poem has it, referring to Northern Ireland during the Troubles as the ‘land of password, handgrip, wink and nod’ (Heaney 1990, 79). Learning to speak does not mean replacing muteness with expressive sound. It means modifying the cry, learning all the ways in which the impulsive demands given being by the howl or scream may be engineered by and into the work of communication. On solemn occasions, often to mark a death respectfully, collectivities commonly practise formal abstention from speech in the form of the Minute’s Silence.

Of course, abstention and renunciation can be instrumental – a wager placed on the chance of an enhanced return. But there may be a more primary kind of abstention, one that seems to make its demand on its own behalf, or even bring its own immediate reward. One form of this is obsessive avoidance rituals, of which the performer builds their life around the shunning of sources of temptation or impurity, or sedulously avoids all kinds of danger, whether in the form of unlucky omens or numbers, or dangerous bacteria. One might still view such a regime as instrumental, in that it is motivated by the dread of whatever consequences are feared, with the payoff being the preservation of health and good fortune. However, in many cases of compulsive avoidance, or actions designed to neutralise or undo other actions, of which the washing of hands may be paradigmatic, a self-fulfilling delight can develop in the very exercise of this apotropaic power of annulling or heading off. Maud Ellmann’s study of the poetics and politics of self-starvation begins with the story of a female hunger striker in Armagh during the protests in 1981, who was released from detention but

died a year later of anorexia nervosa: Ellmann writes that '[s]he took her hunger with her when she left the prison as if she had become addicted to the nothingness that she had learned to substitute for food, clinging to it even at the cost of her life (Ellmann 1993, 1). Ellmann's study concerns itself with a kind of willed hunger that consumes itself in its dark desire for itself, under circumstances in which 'one no longer fasts for justice but for *jouissance*' (Ellmann 1993, 13).

The contemporary associations between fasting, slimming and body-image suggest the eating and its disciplines may be strongly entrained by sexual questions. Michel Foucault suggests that this is actually a reversal of priorities that obtained in the ancient world, that took a long time to accomplish:

[I]t is a trait manifested by all Greek and Roman medicine to accord much more space to the dietetics of alimentation than to that of sex. For this medicine, the thing that matters is eating and drinking. A whole development – evident in Christian monasticism – will be necessary before the preoccupation with sex will begin to match the preoccupation with food. But alimentary abstentions and fasts will long remain fundamental. And it will be an important moment for the history of ethics in European societies when apprehensions about sex and its regimen will significantly outweigh the rigor of alimentary prescriptions. (Foucault 1986, 141)

This kind of fasting may be dissensive rather than collective, in that it may assert a power of self-denial that defies social norms and expectations. As Caroline Walker Bynum suggests, these norms and expectations are often centred on food, as they were for women in the late medieval period. Bynum argues that medieval fasting, among other kinds of privation and self-mortification among women, was not an internalisation of patriarchal prejudices that saw the female body as the source of wickedness and sensual temptation, as corporeality itself in contrast with the soul. Rather it was a kind of ontological poverty-grab, which capitalised on the powerful idea of the femininity of Christ, where femininity meant a mixture of suffering and bountifulness, for suffering was the gift that could be relied on to keep giving, becoming more abundant the poorer it got. This was surely by no means the last time that the ontological advantage-in-disadvantage has been exercised by or on behalf of women against men whose phantasmal power (the power that they and others dream they have) deprives them of the much more potently immediate experience of being as being-powerless, provoking at times passionate intensity of male impotence-envy.

Women thus asserted control in the area in which they anyway exercised it, in that women were then as now largely responsible for the preparation and serving of food. As Bynum shrewdly observes, 'human beings can renounce, or deny themselves, only that which they control' (Bynum 1987, 191) – this remaining true even, perhaps, where control is what seems to be renounced. Piously self-starving women as it were served in every sense (serve being from Latin *servare*, whose primary meaning is to save, deliver or keep unharmed) – conserving themselves in serving themselves up, as Christ did in the eucharist: 'women found it very easy to identify with a deity whose flesh, like

theirs, was food. In mystical ecstasy, in communion, in ascetic *imitatio*, women ate and became a God who was food and flesh' (Bynum 287, 275). This was a kind of weakness that powerful men could only approach indirectly, or through paradox, since they 'needed to become weak and human, yet spiritual "women" in order to proceed towards God ... the man had to see his basic religious commitment as flight from power and glory – for Jesus himself had fled power, no matter how much kings and prelates might wield it in his name. (Bynum 1987, 287, 288). Men and women might agree that female flesh was more fleshly than male flesh, but such agreement led both sexes to see themselves as in some sense female-human... Religious women in the later Middle Ages saw in their own female bodies not only a symbol of the humanness of both genders but also a symbol of – and a means of approach to – the humanity of God (Bynum 1987, 296). Men needed to renounce power and authority to approach God: women could live off the voluptuous fantasy that lived the flesh as renunciation itself: 'Fasting, feeding, and feasting were thus not so much opposite as synonyms. Fasting was flight not *from*, but *into* physicality' (Bynum 1987, 250). Indulging '[t]he sense of body as locus of the divine' (Bynum 1987, 255), pious women could see in their own bodies 'not only a symbol of the humanness of both genders but also a symbol of – and a means of approach to – the humanity of God' (Bynum 1987, 296).

Giorgio Agamben claims, on the slim say-so largely of a passage in Plutarch's *Convivial Questions*, that all festivals may be understood in terms of a ceremony described as 'expulsion of bulimia', in which a slave is driven away from the house with blows from a stick. Agamben sees this as a replacement of animal appetite with social and civilised eating:

what is chased away is not hunger and famine but rather the "hunger of an ox": the beast's continuous and insatiable eating (symbolized by the ox, with its slow and uninterrupted rumination). Chasing away the "bulimic" slave means, then, expelling a certain form of eating (devouring or engorging like wild beasts in order to satiate a hunger that is by definition insatiable), and thus clearing a space for another modality of eating, one that is human and festive, one that can begin only once the "hunger of an ox" has been expelled, once the bulimia has been rendered inoperative and sanctified. Eating, in this respect, is not a *melachah*, an activity directed toward an aim, but in inoperativity and *menuchah*, a Sabbath of nourishment. (Agamben 2011, 107)

In a sense this is a familiar explication of the workings of the civilising process, in Elias's phrase, in which animal appetite, understood as an uncontrolled aggression, is controlled and moderated. Pulsing through Agamben's argument here, however, is a political allegory which sees the appetite of an ox in terms of the uncontrolled demands of consumer capitalism, and the festival as its sanctified suspension, through strike or other kinds of symbolic resistance. There are some odd slithers in Agamben's account – the ox does indeed need to eat constantly, as do many other animals who subsist on a vegetarian diet that does not allow for rest (no gorilla can afford time off the daily grind of food gathering for a sabbath), but this patient, if relentless nibbling seems just the opposite of 'devouring or engorging like wild beasts', oxen being just as emblematic

of the pastoral as sheep. One might say that human beings had leisure for festivals only once they had supplied themselves with the forms of nutritive surplus offered by a carnivorous diet (eating the ox rather than eating like it), which may itself have led to and depended upon the technological discovery of cooking. On this account, the suspension of production and appetite would in fact absolutely depend upon the work of production, indeed be nothing but a production of it.

Bulimia nervosa, which has been seen as a particular form of the hunger strike against normal eating, is able simultaneously to indulge and abstain, and on both sides, on the side of eating and on the side of abstention (the bulimic gorges on deprivation as much as on food. And both anorexia and bulimia can be characterised by a perversely immoderate form of immoderation. The hunger striker prolongs the spectacle of their fast with sips of water, just as the epic fastings of mystics and saints can often be explained by the midnight nibblings in which they have on occasion been detected. The bulimic reverses this through his or her privy disposals of the engorgement of eating, whether through vomiting or seemingly virtuous whirling hours on the exercise bike.

This power of non- or undoing in abstention from the food which is necessary to life, may be equivalent to and perhaps exemplified by the death drive, or whatever else might lie beside or beyond the pleasure principle. Indeed, the acquiescence to death, grudging or willing as it may be, is the most literal kind of abstention, in that it abstains, or holds oneself in abeyance not from any particular form of existence, but from continued personal existence altogether.

But perhaps even this form of absolute abstention is condemned to take some positive form, or to be inflected in some way by the human horror of unstyled existence. Being done for must itself be done in some way or other. In the era we inhabit of expanding and accelerating engineering, we should expect to see growing demands for revivals and extensions of the *artes moriendi*, or arts of dying, so common in other civilisations. Even the wish to die any old how, or, like Beckett's Malone, 'tepid, without enthusiasm', is an inflection of the action we call 'bowing out'. It seems to be difficult to exercise impotentiality non-paradoxically, meaning that, as Andrew Bennett observes, even the act of ending one's own life must often be regarded as an assertion of one's ultimate freedom of action, suicide being 'a profound, unfathomable denial, destruction or negation of the self, and simultaneously ... an ultimate assertion of identity and agency' (Bennett 2012, 2).

We are all subject to this demand, which enquires *quomodo* of every action, even, and especially, the action of refraining or resigning from action. We are all subject to the twin demand of the actor in the stage, that they must, in the sense that they cannot not, do something, even if that something is 'doing nothing'. They also cannot take their leave from the stage except in some style or other, as indicated repeatedly in Sheridan's farce of theatrical rehearsal *The Critic* (1789): one scene ends with a group of characters kneeling, wondering whether they are to shuffle off the stage on their knees (Sheridan 1999, 58); at the end of another, the heroine's confidante, finding

herself stranded on stage, enquires of the author ‘But pray, sir, how am *I* to get off here?’, receiving the irritable reply ‘You! pshaw! What the devil signifies how you get off! Edge away at the top, or where you will’ (Sheridan 1999, 64). Every actor knows the existential aporia of being asked simply to perform an action, like walking to a door and exiting through it, and suddenly being unable to decide how to extract the action from the million other conceivable ways of doing it, or, having decided, how to do it without overdoing it. The action of ceasing to be able to act, or seceding from action, demands to be acted out, and the path to quietus must pass through action. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* recalls Sheridan in the embarrassment suffered by the pompous Pozzo, who finds himself with no way that seems sufficiently convincing of leaving the stage, this anticipating the general difficulty of ‘going’ in the play:

ESTRAGON Then adieu.

POZZO Adieu.

VLADIMIR Adieu.

POZZO Adieu.

Silence. No one moves.

VLADIMIR Adieu.

POZZO Adieu.

ESTRAGON Adieu.

Silence.

[...]

POZZO I don’t seem to be able . . . (*long hesitation*) . . . to depart.

ESTRAGON Such is life. (Beckett 1986, 45-6)

To take no interest in the process of becoming an unbeing, slipping out of existence leaving no stone turned, may seem the most natural and untheatrical way of giving way to it. But there can seem to be an intolerable irresponsibility in such an action, leaving the grieving widow to choose the hymns and wrangle with the insurance company. In a sense the way in which one chooses, or cannot choose not to make any kind of choice about how to extricate oneself from being is the mark of one’s embedding, up to and beyond the ultimate abstention from being, within a collectivity that makes enormously high demands on the ways in which such unactions are enacted, and vice, of course, versa.

It is not accidental that theatre provides the most telling examples of the intertwining of action and the abstention or secession from it. For it is in the theatre that one is forced to recognise the impossibility for a human being of simply acting, without the possibility either of falling short or overdoing it. This is not because the theatre is exceptional, but just the opposite: that the theatre frames off the essential theatricality

of all human behaving. This is in contrast to the suggestion made by Giorgio Agamben that the fluidity of modern forms of labour oppressively makes abstention impossible:

The definitive confusion in our time between jobs and vocations, professional identities and social roles, each of which is impersonated by a walk-on actor whose arrogance is in inverse proportion to the instability and uncertainty of his or her performance. The idea that anyone can do or be anything ... [44-5] is nothing but the reflection of the awareness that everyone is simply bending him- or herself according to this flexibility that is today the primary quality that the market demands from each person. (Agamben 2011, 44-5)

Arguing that '[n]othing makes us more impoverished and less free than this estrangement from impotentiality' (Agamben 2011, 45), Agamben calls implicitly for a strike against this condition, or at least an honouring and harbouring of the capacity to exercise strike action, a phrase might be regarded as a translation of 'impotentiality'.

Those who are separated from their own impotentiality lose ... first of all the capacity to resist. And just as it is only the burning awareness of what we cannot be that guarantees the truth of what we are, so it is only the lucid vision of what we cannot, or can not, do, that gives consistency to our actions. (Agamben 2011, 45)

Agamben implicitly sets impotentiality against the theatricality of the modern confusion of vocation and labour. Impotentiality, abstention, finding a way to exit the stage, is seen in implicitly Platonic terms, as an access to the originary incandescence that casts the shadows in the playhouse – the 'burning awareness' and 'lucid vision' that will sweep away the maddeningly indefinite chiaroscuro of our theatrical condition. But abstention, in the form of the ambivalent play of prohibition and licence that belongs to the festival, has been caught up in, has indeed been the engine of theatricality for too long to be swept away by this kind of gesture, or by its promise. Nothing could embody, not just the sabbath capacity for impotentiality, but the necessity of a measure of impotentiality, more than the stage of being which human beings can never simply exit. There is no kind of getting off that does not remain in the wings, no striking of a set that is not another setting.

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