

## *Foreword*

### An Obituary for the Liberal

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Nietzsche tells us that “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.”<sup>1</sup> Only through our experience of art can the incomprehensible cruelty of a murderous world be made bearable. The law can neither curtail evil any more than science can resist mimicking the ambitions of a God it so eagerly banished. Existence is justified aesthetically, since the world is infinitely cruel, and humanity cannot reasonably claim any righteous place on the surface of the planet. Only pitiful aggregations of small comfort—art, music, poetry, can compensate the tragedy of our cosmic insignificance.

*Ecce Humanitas* tells us that “humanity is bound to the sacrificial model of existence. And such sacred harm continues to bring us to the point of our annihilation,” and so “countering annihilation requires liberating the political imagination from the scene of the sacrificial, for it is precisely our allegiance to a sacred claim on life where the memory of violence is inscribed with the logics of violence to come.”

This poses quite a paradox, since “if through horror we find freedom,” then the logic of catastrophism might find some kind of millenarian conclusion, say, in the prospect of the impending ecological extinction, as if the logical solution to the end of violence would be the end of man. Evans suggests that “instead of looking with confidence toward a postliberal society in which we commit ourselves to transforming the living conditions of the world of peoples, what has taken its place is an intellectually barren landscape offering no alternative other than to live out our catastrophically fated existence with ever greater speed and intensities.” This infertile plain, scorched by false promises, deserves at the very least “an obituary for the liberal” before a new theory of humanity can be conceived.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud contends that “unpleasure corresponds to an increase in the quantity of excitement and pleasure to a diminution.”<sup>2</sup> We might speculate upon the (albeit reductive) dynamics of human evolution, where unpleasure presumably corresponds to outbursts of profligate violence, and a diminution in the quantity of excitement to the more sedentary forms of modern civility; this liberalizing of the base instincts would concede to a more favorable affection for the arts and humanities, and come to define “what it means to live a valued life.”

Staying loyal to Freud’s view of human teleology, we might be encouraged to imagine how our cowering ancestors were teased out from the safety of the dark, lured by a vision of the luminous, giving valorization to an enlightened truth lying beyond. Emerging into the light, leaving the congealed wake of primal violence behind, this elevation from bloodshed has come to define the mythical nature of our struggle. Each heroic move forwards is accompanied by a slip back into war and genocide, upon which the various ontotheological versions of humanity return to contest their sectarian claims with unbridled violence, each relapse bringing into question the very validity of the conjecture “humanity.”

In striving to eliminate “man’s inhumanity to man” in favor of a more liberal world, we each time unwittingly concede to the sequence man/inhumanity/man, which structures the promissory mythology of progress, since each fall is memorialized with the injunction “lest we forget.” Inscribed in the institutionalized memory of past violence is a renewed violence that acquires its retaliatory force from the symbolic power of the dead. It’s as if also implicit in the process of memorializing violence is a form of amnesia, so that we experience each outrage afresh. Pierre Klossowski describes how the threat of transgression is intimately tied to the sacred, in a sequence which ensnares violence to a ritual repetition: “a transgression must engender another transgression. . . . its image is each time represented as though it had never been carried out.”<sup>3</sup>

For Evans, “the psychic life of violence” describes the process by which violence is returned to utility, transformed by the necessity of prohibition, and absorbed into the immanent rule of law. He writes: “The sacrificial is precisely that which allows for the unbearable to become tolerable. And in the process of its consecration, it allows the intolerable to become an act of symbolic importance. It enables the exceptional event to appear as something altogether necessary, all the while it keeps hold of the exceptional act in order to normalize the violent will to rule.” Consecrated symbolic power demands a unity of response, a univocality

of sorrow; for the individual to be humane, they must aspire to humanity. And, for Evans, implicit in such an obligation is the fact that “humanity is ultimately a mythical claim, demanding its own sacrifices. Indeed, not only does humanity remain promissory and yet to be fully realized, it has for the past few decades grammatically justified the most devastating forms of global violence in the name of this promise. Humanity was meant to be realized through the wars fought to prove its very existence.” The sacred memorializes the event of transgression, sublimating a deep reverence for violence in the body of atonement. Such tensions hold the earth together, binding raw energy to matter, primed for volatile release in spontaneous eruptions of sacrifice, cruelty, and holocaust, since it is catastrophe that gives equilibrium its temporary coherence. It is the renunciation of violence and the function of atonement that draws us forwards toward the next encounter with relapse and the new specter of sacralized blood.

Evans suggests that “the aesthetic secularization of life begins with the raw realities of degradation, torture, and human suffering—an image of life reduced to its abstract nakedness.” Hans Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1522) is arguably one of the most powerful representations of Christ’s death (fig. F.1), since it is also one of the most heretical. Dostoyevsky’s Prince Myshkin refers to it by stating, “Why, some people may lose their faith by looking at that picture!”<sup>4</sup> Holbein’s painting shows Christ simply laid out after crucifixion. The stark horizontality of the painting and close-cropped framing has the effect of stretching the body beyond reasonable proportion, until one realizes that the cross has monstrously elongated Christ’s body by the sheer force of gravity, redemption denied by the dead weight of his mortal incarnation. His face is gaunt, the skin livid and discolored, the body wracked with rigor mortis—this is an image at once painful and beautiful, embodying what Evans refers to as “the conditions of vulnerability so endemic to liberal subjectivity.” But what exactly is being asked of us, as we take in the sight of Christ petrified in grotesque human



**Fig. F.1** Hans Holbein, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. 1522. Oil on panel. Public domain.

form? It seems that implicit in Holbein's humanized corpse—this forensic husk, with the painter's cruel compassion for its ruined flesh and dislocated bone—is the appalling realization that this man is dead. It is the abject power of such a blasphemous spectacle, and of the shocking sight of Divinity so transgressed, that compels us (even us atheists) to repudiate the banal violence of the scene, to restore to Christ's sacrifice its proper and sacred value. After all, Christ died for our sins, but ultimately, in the awful vision of Christ's broken anatomy, here so belittled by mortal violence, it is violence itself that must be redeemed.

With Holbein's Christ, there is an extraordinary presentiment of modern secularization, since, for a religion nucleated by the originary murder of the son of God, the guilty deficit would eventually reach its sell-by date . . . In a cursory view of Western secular society, the sacred has ostensibly taken sanctuary in derelict places of worship, where simple caretakers of the faith are to be found abandoned to their obscure rituals—composing ordained relics upon their altars with the perseverance of madmen, endlessly rearranging the fragments of their sanity. Evans cites Nietzsche's notorious proclamation: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? . . . must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?" With God dead, what need is there of the sacred to enforce its superstitious prohibitions once scientific rationality has overcome superstition?

Liberal society would invent its sacred games and claim that it has engendered less violence. The idea of humanity has remained intact, as the promissory genus under which the humane individual subscribes to the myth of progress. We are no longer at liberty to squander life since it is literally all we have, and the mindfulness of life surely gives rise to a quantifiable diminution of violence by dint of the secular respect for the here-and-now. Life is paramount, since the non-existence of God has made each of us a god in our own right, each a species-of-one, an identitarian monad; and yet, paradoxically, our religion is still *humanity*.

Evans's argument, then, is that the "modernist tendency to reduce life to questions of pure materiality devoid of any spiritual or metaphysical claims" withdraws the sacred from superstition only to embed it at a juridico-political level—painless lethal injection may have replaced the barbarity of the public square, where the condemned was ritualistically dismembered, in order to save them from their petty mortal protestations, before being subjected to further torture to extract confession. Their authentic pain would salvage their souls from damnation and deliver them to the mercy of God—the sacred was thus made

public. Lethal injection condemns its subject to the full weight of the law in strict medical isolation, separated as if in possession of a contagion. A barbiturate paralytic and potassium solution are administered for the express purpose of causing rapid death, so that the purposefully violent component in execution complies instead with the humane—corresponding to this decrease in the quantity of excitement and pleasure, violence itself is liberalized and execution civilized. Despite execution by lethal injection lacking a visible subject, the mythologizing modes of speculation make millions captive to its sacralizing power: the hopeless death-row documentaries, the agonized relatives, the impotent prison vigils, the state pardon rejected on live TV as the moment of execution is broadcast live. With death subtracted from the visible, spectacle acquires a new intensity—humanity frenzied by the very absence of sacred violence. Absence only seems to heighten the libidinal economy of the spectacle—as Freud notes, “This pleasure in looking [scopophilia] becomes a perversion . . . if, instead of being preparatory to the normal sexual aim, it supplants it.”

The challenge set by Brad Evans in *Ecce Humanitas* is to locate where the “eschatological mastery of life” occurs in a secular society that claims to eschew the sacred. Regarding the mass transcendentalization of the dead, he asks: “What would it mean, for instance, to feel the pain and suffering of every single of victim of Hiroshima?” What would it mean to deny Hiroshima’s mushroom cloud its silver lining?

When in the wake of the 9/11 attacks President Bush threatened to bomb the Taliban back into the dark ages, a secular line was drawn between forms of violence putatively categorized as the divine and the systemic, the *blunt* and the *precise*, the archaic and the modern. The subtraction of Western troops from distant war zones is consistent with a secular timeline, in which the investment in technology marks the divergence from God. Specifically, the unmanned drone is the symbolic sublimation of the Omnipotent, the all-seeing eye of the soldier who is no longer required to sacrifice themselves to a heroic death. Unmanned drones do the military’s dirty work, except there’s nothing very dirty about operating a drone—the most likely threat looming over the operator is the drowsy drive home after a long shift. One imagines the posthumous medal awarded as a sacralization of the fatal car crash.

Stating his motives for writing *Ecce Humanitas*, the author explains, “If liberalism was a globally ambitious project aimed at governing planetary life through its sacred wars, this ambition was over. And, like all dying projects, its myths had been exposed, its violence revealed, and its remaining advocates increasingly

vicious in their desperation to cling on to whatever entitlements its violence once permitted. Hence—while the book had become an inquiry into the triangulation between violence, the sacred, and the void, it also needed to confront the end of liberal times.”

Nothing is too sacred for Evans, since “to critique the sacred is precisely to critique the hierarchization of power—the metaphysical compulsion to give rise to some higher unity that had already been there—which then continues to alienate and draws upon violence to make its claims visible.” With the appearance of “a new dark age” and the rise of a new, fascistic “monstrous myth-making machine,” *Ecce Humanitas* draws us to the urgency of our times, reminding us that “the genocide of millions has brought together in ethical tension the nihilistic logics of disposability with the attempts to render life meaningful by inscribing sacred values onto the mass graves of the annihilated.”

Nothing could embody the apogee of the liberal project better than a recent announcement by the U.S. army in its commitment to make war more environmentally sustainable—suggesting it will load its munitions with engineered plant seeds to enable the re-wilding of its battlefields. It is as if liberal virtuosity had found a perfect vehicle for world peace in the machinery of warfare. In a return to the scene of original sin, where humanity was first condemned to suffering and the dominion of death—and endless sacrifices, war, and violence pursued in the concessionary name of the sacred—for Evans, “the Fall, in the end, proved itself more potent as a secular tale of man’s potential to bring about his own destruction.” And once the bombs stop falling and the dust settles, the horror of war will give rise to a second Garden of Eden, fertilized by violence and the enriched soil of the dead, a truly verdant flora will flourish, with trees to populate the earth after humanity has wiped itself from the surface of the planet in a rather touching sacrifice to planetary ecology.

Holbein’s *Dead Christ* is laid out, hooked up to life support. Humanity gathers, hushed, anxious for even the faintest glimmer of life, aghast at the sight of the respiratory bellows reaching an optimistic peak only to collapse with a hollow wheeze. It’s difficult not to recall the rotten corpse in David Fincher’s *Seven*, as, to our utter horror, the victim unexpectedly gasps alive. This what Brad Evans is calling out in *Ecce Humanitas*. The resuscitation of the manhandled corpse of the sacred, which violently revives after supposedly breathing its last breath to pose the terminal question: how do we bring a possible future back from the dark gravity of memorialization?