

TOWARDS A TENTATIVE TYPOLOGY OF THE LITERARY REFUSENIK

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ABSTRACT

Literary history teems with refusenik figures who, in one way or another, and for one reason or another, 'prefer not to' partake in many of society's most sacrosanct pursuits and who therefore rebel against fundamental social values, for the most part passively. Yet there is arguably only one pure refusenik in literary history; that is, a figure who is defined by nothing but his act of radical refusal, uncontaminated by any active and positive desires: Melville's *Bartleby* (1853). Apart from his grand gesture of refusal, *Bartleby* is a man without qualities, preferences or history, who, in the end, as Deleuze puts it, 'dies of "civil disobedience"'. Comparatively speaking, Ivan Goncharov's *Ivan Ilytch Oblomov* (1859) is a feeble kind of refusenik, for he remains positively attached to repose, nostalgia (both for Tsarist Russia and for his childhood), and his gourmandise. Thomas Mann's *Gustav von Aschenbach* (1912), however, engages once again in a more unadulterated *Bartlebian* act of primary refusal. In this article I consider some of the primary features and poetological and ideological functions of a range of literary refusenik figures. All of them raise wider ethical questions about the social values against which they openly rebel. These include, above all, the values of productivity and industriousness, and the subscription to a work ethic that endows work with profound existential or spiritual significance.

In der Literaturgeschichte wimmelt es von 'Refusenik'-Charakteren, die es auf unterschiedliche Weisen und aus unterschiedlichen Gründen vorziehen, zentrale gesellschaftliche Ziele nicht aktiv zu verfolgen, und die somit, zumeist passiv, gegen grundlegende soziale Werte rebellieren. Es gibt jedoch nur einen reinen, absoluten Ur-Refusenik in Form einer Figur, die durch nichts als ihren Akt der Verweigerung gekennzeichnet ist, und die keinerlei aktive oder positive Begehren und Ziele hat: Melvilles *Bartleby* (1853). Abgesehen von seiner dramatischen, allumfassenden Verweigerungsgeste bleibt *Bartleby* ein Mann ohne Eigenschaften, Präferenzen und Geschichte, der, wie Deleuze es formulierte, am Ende an seinem psycho-sozialen zivilen Ungehorsam zugrunde geht. Ivan Goncharovs *Ivan Ilytch Oblomov* (1859) ist im Vergleich nur ein halbherziger Refusenik, da er Konzepten wie Müßiggang, Nostalgie und der Schlemmerei positiv verhaftet bleibt. Thomas Manns *Gustav von Aschenbach* hingegen zelebriert einen nachdrücklicheren Akt der Ablehnung, der *Bartleby*s Totalverweigerung näher kommt. Dieser Aufsatz untersucht anhand von Fallbeispielen die zentralen poetologischen und ideologischen Funktionen und Charakteristika bedeutsamer literarischer Refusenik-Figuren. Alle werfen tiefgreifende Fragen zu ethischen Themen auf sowie zu den spezifischen sozialen Werten, gegen die sie rebellieren. Zu diesen gehören vor allem Produktivität und Aktivität und eine Arbeitsethik, die Arbeit streng mit spiritueller und existenzieller Bedeutung verknüpft.

Literary history teems with refusenik figures who, in one way or another, 'prefer not to' partake in many of society's most sacrosanct pursuits. Among the first is Gilgamesh, who, grieving for his companion Enkidu, sheds his offices and cultural skins to wander through the wilderness, in search of purpose. Then there is the sulking warrior Achilles, who goes on strike during the long battle for Troy and, upon his return, commits a taboo-breaking act of barbarism. There is the courageous conscientious objector Antigone, and Dante's slothful Belacqua, who is too weary to make the effort to climb Mount Purgatory. In more modern times, Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas (1810) comes to mind, who, ideologically blinkered and driven by an absolutist idea of justice, ends up committing many injustices himself. There are also Herman Melville's doggedly revenge-obsessed Captain Ahab (1851), Joris-Karl Huysmans' neurasthenic aesthete Duc Jean Des Esseintes (1884), and Joseph Conrad's cruelly disillusioned Colonel Kurtz (1899). In the twentieth century, Thomas Mann's clownish but tragic wastrel Christian Buddenbrook (1901) as well as his burnt-out writer Gustav von Aschenbach (1912) fit the bill. The same is true of André Gide's Nietzsche-inspired immoralist Michel (1902), Franz Kafka's picky eater and committed body-artist, the 'Hungerkünstler' (1922), Hermann Hesse's Harry Haller (1927), J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield (1951), and Graham Greene's burnt-out case, Querry (1960).

There are also, of course, almost all of Samuel Beckett's characters, who must go on, can't go on, and yet will go on. In our own century, there are Kathrin Röggl's sleep- and meaning-deprived victims of relentless neoliberalism in *wir schlafen nicht* (2004), some of whom, at the end of yet another soul-destroying management consultancy-sector fair, throw away their mobile phones, quit or commit suicide. And then, more recently still, there is, in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), a profoundly alienated, trust-funded young woman who seems to have it all, but who voluntarily enters into a state of drug-induced hibernation for an entire year in her apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

There are, of course, many other literary characters who give up or give in, temporarily or for good, who decline to play by the rules, either to pursue a single goal with absolute dedication or because, having joined the ranks of the nihilists, they have lost all hope in a better future, and who withdraw and reject, or who end up in a state of spiritual or even literal paralysis, like Joyce's Dubliners. Yet there is arguably only one absolutely pure refusenik in literary history; that is, a figure who is defined by nothing but an act of radical refusal, uncontaminated by any active and positive desires: Melville's *Bartleby* (1853). As Gilles Deleuze has pointed out, *Bartleby* is marked by pure, patient passivity and 'a negativism beyond all negation'.¹ Apart from his grand gesture of refusal, *Bartleby* is a man

¹ Gilles Deleuze, 'Bartleby, Or, The Formula', in *Essays: Critical and Clinical*, tr. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, London 1998, pp. 68–90 (p. 71).

without qualities, preferences, properties, and references, who, in the end, as Deleuze puts it, ‘dies of “civil disobedience”’.² Ivan Goncharov’s Ivan Ilytch Oblomov (1859) comes a close second to this Deleuzian ideal of will-less negativism. Yet Oblomov is much less unadulterated a refusenik, for he remains positively attached to repose, nostalgia (both for Tsarist Russia and for his childhood), and his gourmandise. In this article I consider some of the primary features and functions of these literary refuseniks. Disparate as they are, I shall attempt a tentative typology of the refusenik by outlining some common traits and tropes.

All these figures raise wider ethical questions concerning the social values that their refuseniks either reject passively or against which they openly rebel. These include, above all, the values of productivity and industriousness, and the subscription to a work ethic that endows work with profound existential or spiritual significance. The rejection of the value-cluster associated with productivity is most notable in the cases of *Bartleby* and *Oblomov*, as well as in the cases of Moshfegh’s and Rögglä’s protagonists. One could also make a case for Aschenbach and the Buddenbrook brothers here, as well as for Dante’s Belacqua.³ Although Belacqua’s refusal can for obvious reasons not be interpreted as a refusal of specifically capitalist productivity and industriousness, his example shows that industriousness’s opposite – sloth, or *acedia* – have greatly troubled thinkers in other periods, too.

Another set of values commonly problematised by literary refuseniks pertain to the conventions governing social interactions, manifest, for example, in manners, decorum, and concern for status – Holden Caulfield, Harry Haller, and Querry come to mind here. In the other cases, we can see in the refuseniks a tenacious dedication to a specific idea, ideal, or aim that is incompatible with basic ethico-legal social agreements concerning the value of the life of others, or of one’s own. Figures who fall into this category include Achilles, Antigone, Ahab, Kohlhaas, Curtz, and the Hungerkünstler, as well as the entire range of the Marquis de Sade’s sadistic personae. However, the latter grouping in particular do not fully fit with

² *Ibid.*, pp. 74 and 88.

³ To a certain extent, even Henry David Thoreau belongs to that group. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Thoreau famously withdrew to a cabin at the shores of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, where he lived deeply and ‘deliberately’, by the labour of his hands only, for two years and two months. In the first chapter of his account, entitled ‘Economics’, Thoreau introduces the intriguing notion of ‘life cost’. Rather than seeking to gain as much money as possible, and to accumulate as many possessions as one’s salary allows, he assesses the question of work from a radically pragmatic perspective, turning it upside-down in the process. Determining his most essential needs, he calculates precisely the exact amount of money he needs in order to pay for these. Valuing time and freedom over the luxuries of life, Thoreau finds he needs to work only six weeks of the year in order to cover his minimum expenses, and is subsequently free to dedicate the rest of his time to doing what he really desires and values: philosophising and spending time in nature. The normative virtues of work, productivity, riches, and social esteem simply have no purchase in his personal value system. See Henri David Thoreau, *Walden*, London 2016.

the focus of this volume on figures without preferences, and who do not strongly articulate alternative ideals. In other words, these characters like Antigone and Kohlhaas reject social conventions for *something*, not for nothing. They are, in fact, more akin to extreme ideologues (whether still active believers in their creed or else radically disenchanting) than to refusenik nihilists. Andreas Gehrlach and Marie Kolkenbrock, in their 'Introduction' to this volume, understand the refusenik as a figure who is driven by 'an apparently unreasoned and impulsive, yet deeply felt sensation of "just not wanting to",' who feels a 'compulsive need to refuse' that is 'not based on theoretical considerations' and that does not follow 'a predetermined strategy of subversion'. Moreover, the reasoning of the primary refusenik is not explicitly explained. The figures listed above, who refuse social norms for something else that is clearly articulated, then, do not quite meet our criteria. They believe in and defend values such as justice, friendship, kinship, art, revenge, or authenticity.

What makes the purer refuseniks interesting from a literary-critical perspective is in fact precisely that they are devised by their authors as ambiguous or even fundamentally polysemic. It is for this reason that they continue to invite rich and diverse readings, and these include our own tendencies to view them as potential crusaders against current neo-liberal values with which we may disagree. Depending on one's perspective, they can be read either as powerful cyphers of protest, or else as cyphers of the damage that our economic systems and social values can do to individuals. It is also possible (and many a critic has done so) to diagnose some of the classic literary refuseniks with one or more mental health issues, such as melancholia, depression, anorexia, social anxiety, or burnout. In these cases, the act of primary rejection is neatly pathologised by the critic, and can result in neglecting to explore the more complex tensions between the mind, body, and the social domain that these texts invite. Psychoanalytically minded critics might argue that it is the death drive that is at work in figures such as Bartleby, the Hungerkünstler, Aschenbach, and Oblomov. These figures do not so much give up as give in to a desire to return to a state of permanent tranquility, in which they will be immune to the siren-call of desire and freed from the burdens of individuation. All activity, Freud famously suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), is after all anathema to a significant part of us, as one of our core drives (Thanatos, the counterpart of Eros, the life drive) is focused exclusively on returning us to an inanimate state.⁴

In readings following this specific pattern of pathologisation, the object of pathologisation is the psyche of an individual character, and, more precisely, specific shortcomings, behaviours, or traits, such as sloth in the

⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920)', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and tr. James Strachey, 24 vols, London 2001, XVIII, pp. 1–64.

case of Dante's and then Beckett's Belacqua. These may be construed as vices or else as illnesses, involuntary afflictions for which the character cannot be held responsible, or, at least, not exclusively. The case of Dante is particularly instructive in this context. In the Middle Ages, sloth (or *acedia*) not only signified laziness but, more importantly, a serious spiritual failing caused by insufficient faith, which was deemed to be one of the Seven Deadly Sins and for which the individual was held personally responsible.⁵ In the *Divine Comedy* (1308–21), Dante, who was well aware of the theological debates on the cardinal sins, engages with *acedia* in a sustained and systematic manner. Not only does his poem chronicle the gradual overcoming of the character Dante's own spiritual and physical weariness in the course of his journey from Hell to Paradise, but it also features various representations of slothful and *acedic* characters.

In fact, it is possible to argue that Dante's own defining sin is *acedia*, for, at the beginning of the poem, he has lost faith, is burnt-out, broken-hearted, and world-weary. In the opening canto of *Inferno*, we learn that Dante, halfway through the journey of his life, found himself in a dark wood, alone and fearful, having strayed from the righteous path. His midlife crisis is manifest in a state of spiritual apathy, a 'weariness of the heart'. He has lost his way both literally and metaphorically. Full of doubts, his faith is weak, political chaos reigns in Florence, and he is not properly honouring the memory of his beloved Beatrice. Fortunately, however, he meets the Roman poet Virgil, who has been sent to him by God at Beatrice's request, and who guides him through Hell and Purgatory, and finally to the gates of Heaven, where Dante re-encounters the lost love of his life. In the final part of the poem, Beatrice escorts him through the celestial realm, explaining to him the nature of truth, love, and grace – concepts he has forgotten or even actively rejected. In the end, however, her systematically re-educated charge glimpses the divine, and is able to return to life on earth with renewed spiritual vigour and strengthened faith.

The Dante we encounter in the opening canto of *Inferno* is not only lost spiritually, but also lacking in energy, and his descent into Hell is punctuated by recurrent moments of exhaustion. At the end of Canto III he collapses, 'like a man whom sleep has seized'.⁶ We learn that he was 'full of sleep just at /the point where I abandoned the true path'.⁷ He repeatedly finds it necessary to let his 'tired body rest',⁸ and repeatedly

⁵ See, for example, Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature*, Chapel Hill 1967; Werner Post, *Acedia – Das Laster der Trägheit. Zur Geschichte der siebten Todsünde*, Freiburg and Vienna 2011; and St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, ed. Timothy McDermott, London 1989, p. 365. See also Anna Katharina Schaffner, *Exhaustion: A History*, New York 2016, pp. 31–51.

⁶ Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, tr. Allen Mandelbaum, New York 1995, p. 71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

bemoans his 'exhausted force' (*virtute stanco*).⁹ But, as his teacher Virgil's influence grows, Dante's attitude changes: the closer he comes to Paradise, the more his sins are purged, the greater his energy levels become, as he sheds both his physical sluggishness and his spiritual apathy like a heavy old skin. In the case of Dante, then, there is no ambiguity about his *acedia* and failure properly to honour divine creation. His initial apathetic refusenik stance is represented as a sin to be purged and overcome.

Yet, on his journey, Dante also encounters his old friend Belacqua, who is trapped in the Ante-Purgatory, where he is punished for his slothful behaviour. Dante and Virgil find him among a group lounging in the shade of a massive boulder at the foot of Mount Purgatory:

as men beset by listlessness [*neghienza*] will rest.
 And one of them, who seemed to me exhausted [*lasso*],
 was sitting with his arms around his knees;
 between his knees, he kept his head bent down.
 'O my sweet lord,' I said, 'look carefully
 at one who shows himself more languid [*negligente*] than
 he would have been were laziness [*pigrizia*] his sister!'
 Then that shade turned toward us attentively,
 lifting his eyes, but just above his thigh,
 and said: 'Climb, then, if you're so vigorous!'¹⁰

Unlike Dante, Belacqua is too tired and too lethargic to muster up the energy to climb Mount Purgatory, on the top of which potential salvation awaits those who make the effort. His movements and speech are slow, he sits with his head hanging between his knees, and he lifts his eyes just high enough to be able to see Dante and his guide when they come across him. When Dante enquires what he is doing there, he learns that Belacqua refuses to undertake the arduous process of repenting his sins, which, ironically, are hesitancy and sloth. For Dante, Belacqua's refusal to climb Mount Purgatory is clearly owing to a bad spiritual attitude; that is, a lack of hope and faith, a dislike of effort, and an undue attachment to comfort and the pleasures of the flesh. Another, more modern interpretation might, however, consider Belacqua to be a victim of a lack of willpower, energy, or optimism, which may or may not be within the scope of individual agency. We may even think of Belacqua as a rebel refusenik, someone who simply declines to work for God's forgiveness, and who rejects the very value of divine grace and salvation, and many others, including productivity and activity, besides. When, in the early 1930s, Samuel Beckett makes Belacqua the protagonist of his first novel, he does so in part to challenge the theology behind Dante's condemnation of him.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66. Dante, *The Divine Comedy. 1: Inferno*, Italian text with translation and comment by John D. Sinclair, Oxford and New York 1961, p. 40.

¹⁰ Dante, *The Divine Comedy* (note 6), p. 233. Dante, *Purgatorio* (note 9), pp. 60–2.

In Marxist, neo-Marxist, and anti-neoliberal readings, the refusenik is often seen as a powerful symbol of resistance. Deleuze, for example, writes that ‘even in his catatonic or anorexic state, Bartleby is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America, the *Medicine-Man*, the new Christ or the brother to us all’.¹¹ This is possible precisely because in many works featuring such refuseniks the boundaries between world-weariness, exhaustion, paralysis, nihilism, capitalism-fatigue, and passive forms of political activism are deliberately blurred. Bartleby, for example – the most powerfully polysemic refusenik in literary history – does not have to be interpreted simply as a burnt-out depressive, a weary melancholic who exposes the hypocrisy of shallow pretend-charity, or someone firmly in the grip of the death drive, determined to bring to its conclusion a drawn-out suicide mission. Reading ‘Bartleby’ from the perspective of 2020, we may be inclined to interpret this tale of refusal as a troubling critique of capitalist values. The story’s subtitle clearly announces it as a ‘Story of Wall Street,’ where the lawyer’s offices in which Bartleby suffers such a rapid deterioration in productivity and mental health are located. All the windows look out onto brick walls, shafts, and dead ends. Death- and tunnel symbolism is everywhere in this narrative. Moreover, Bartleby is not the only unproductive and damaged worker – Turkey and Nippers, too, are dysfunctional in their own ways; unlike Bartleby, however, they are able to be productive for brief periods and neatly complement each other, and thereby remain in the camp of the functional dysfunctionals. Bartleby starts out copying arduously, but soon prefers not to perform an increasing number of tasks, finally informing the narrator that he has given up copying altogether. From that point onwards, he spends his days in ‘dead-wall reveries’, gazing dull-eyed at the ‘dead brick wall’ opposite his window.¹²

Even after he is fired, Bartleby refuses to leave the premises, which the conflict-shy narrator, in search for a frictionless solution, eventually vacates himself. Significantly, Bartleby also refuses the narrator’s offer of money – he will not be paid off; currency holds no value for him. In the end, Bartleby, who continues to haunt the building, is carried off to the Tombs, a local jail, where he stops eating and gradually wastes away, fittingly dying in a foetal position, curled up in front of one of the prison walls. ‘Poor, pale, passive’ Bartleby, who is repeatedly described as ‘motionless’, ‘mild’, and ‘cadaverous’, appears to be dead in life, devoid of any desires, defined only negatively by what he would ‘prefer not to’ do.¹³ Melville provides no backstory or explanation (apart from an unsatisfactory rumour concerning the copyist’s previous employment in a dead letter office). Readers are

¹¹ Deleuze, ‘Bartleby, Or, The Formula’ (note 1), p. 90.

¹² Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, in *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Selected Tales*, ed. Robert Milder, Oxford 1998, pp. 1–41 (p. 21).

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 11, and 19.

thus invited to assume that the ‘dull, wearisome and lethargic’ work of copying – a particularly soul-destroying and creativity-killing activity that can be seen to function as a cypher for the conditions of capitalist office work more generally – has brought about Bartleby’s decline.¹⁴ And yet maybe it simply precipitated it – after all, there is something odd about Bartleby from the start. Alternatively, we could view his choice of occupation as an apt attempt to externalise his inner state, as a perhaps unconscious effort to seek an environment that is as lifeless and soulless as possible, thus reflecting how he already feels. Either way, Bartleby can be read as a figure who forsakes participation in the soul-destroying rat race, and who holds up a disturbing mirror to a society obsessed with productivity and profit, and whose compassion for the weak and troubled is only skin-deep at best.

Another figure who very neatly straddles the divide between the pathologisation of the person and of the system is Oblomov. Although his name has become synonymous with laziness – he was another of Beckett’s favoured characters – there is much more to the only son of a landowning and serf-holding family, whose inability but also unwillingness to hold down a job and to take care of his estate and financial affairs leads to his tragic social decline. He is best known as a masterful procrastinator sporting a threadbare Oriental dressing-gown, who rarely leaves his bed, wearily observing how everything around him is falling to pieces. On one level, Goncharov’s novel may be read as social critique, a cautionary tale that reveals the economically and psychologically corrosive effects of an unreformed feudal society. Oblomov’s bickering and deeply unhealthy relationship with his man-servant, Zahar, symbolises the political paralysis of Tsarist Russia, caused by the torpid serf-holding nobility who stood in the way of progress but also by the (possibly deliberate) inefficiency of their serfs. Yet, on another level, Goncharov’s novel raises more profound questions about the meaning of life and the value of work, exploring, as it does, the philosophical reasons for Oblomov’s refusal to partake in life’s ordinary trials and pleasures.

Above all, Oblomov longs to recreate an earthly paradise, an idyllic existence where all work is banned. There is an infantile, regressive dimension to this dream, as it closely resembles his early childhood experiences. In the country, cared for by his doting parents and their many servants, he was free from any responsibilities to manage his life. Instead, he could live a life of eternal leisure, in which there was no work for him to do and the laws of productivity and efficiency had no purchase. Oblomov’s best friend is a man called Andrey Stolz, who is in every respect his opposite. Stolz – ‘pride’ – is inventive, productive, optimistic, and full of energy. Significantly, he was brought up by a German father, from whom he inherited his discipline and apt hand at business, as

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

well as other stereotypically Teutonic qualities. His dreamy Russian mother, by contrast, bestowed on him the passionate and spiritual dimensions of his character. Representing progress and capitalist inventiveness, he is the very embodiment of efficiency. Stolz's German heritage here neatly serves as short-hand for the exact counter-image of the refusenik, epitomising heightened productivity and efficacy. But fortunately, his machine-like qualities are tempered by his Russian genes, so he also has a heart, and builds bridges and schools. It is with Stolz that Oblomov shares his philosophical reservations about living an active and industrious life:

All these society people are dead men, men fast asleep, they are worse than I am! What is their aim in life? They do not lie in bed like me, they dash backwards and forwards every day like flies, but what is the good?¹⁵

Stolz eventually accuses Oblomov of Oblomovism, a term he has coined to capture Oblomov's sublime lethargy, turpitude, and lack of ambition. Against this charge, however, Oblomov vigorously defends himself:

What, then, is the ideal life, you think? What is not Oblomovism?' he asked timidly and without enthusiasm. 'Doesn't everyone strive for the very same things that I dream of? Why,' he added more confidently, 'isn't the purpose of all your running about, your passions, wars, trade, politics – to secure rest, to attain this ideal of a lost paradise?'¹⁶

Yet Oblomov, too, suffers from what could be diagnosed as a host of mental ailments, such as hypochondria, extreme social anxiety, exhaustion, weariness, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. About life, he declares: 'It disturbs one, gives one no peace! I wish I could lie down and go to sleep ... forever.'¹⁷ Eventually, he finds an arrangement that allows him to settle down 'slowly and gradually in the plain and wide coffin he had made of his existence, like ancient hermits who, turning away from life, dig their own graves'.¹⁸ And Oblomov's death wish is soon fulfilled. He not only practises a kind of death in life but also dies young – of a stroke brought on by oversleeping, lack of exercise, and too much vodka, wine, red meat, and rich and spicy dishes.

It is precisely these sensual and alimentary pleasures that are shunned by Kafka's complex (partial) refusenik, the Hungerkünstler, who refuses nourishment, and makes an art of it. But although the Hungerkünstler declines to partake in life's feast, he is not at all, like *Bartleby*, motivated by an absence of desire. In fact, he is driven by a strong ambition – to be the best Hungerkünstler of them all. In addition, as readers learn in the

¹⁵ Ivan Goncharov, *Oblomov*, tr. Natalie Duddington, New York and London 1992, p. 196.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 563.

end, all his life he has sought in vain for palatable food, and for the most part, when he is not plagued by crippling doubts, he also upholds a belief in the principles and values of rigorous body-performance art.

My final case studies are André Gide's *Immoralist* and Thomas Mann's *Gustav von Aschenbach*. In *Death in Venice* (1912) the latter – middle-aged and burnt-out – heads South where he declines to continue to live according to the dictates of decorum and repression, which had previously dominated his life. His refusal is perhaps more passive than active, an act of giving in, letting himself be overtaken by a potent mix of death drive, existential fatigue, and libidinal desires. Aschenbach's case also illustrates the characteristic 'indecisive hovering' of the refusenik, to which Gehrlich and Kolkenbrock, via Agamben, refer in their 'Introduction' and which turns out to be fatal. In Venice, Aschenbach – death-driven from the start, and secretly elated by the prospect of non-futurity – allows himself to become infatuated with a young boy. Indulging this infatuation, which takes a primarily voyeuristic and stalkerish form, he fails to protect himself from and also to warn the boy's mother about the cholera epidemic that has befallen Venice. This twofold non-action – that is, the decision to save neither the object of his desire nor himself from certain death – is the most ethically consequential implication of Aschenbach's refusal to continue to adhere to social conventions.

Aschenbach is introduced at the beginning of the novella as a burnt-out case. The very first adjective Mann deploys to characterise him is 'überreizt', and images of over-stretching delicate organisms and over-wrought nervous economies permeate the entire novella.¹⁹ These are very much in line with late nineteenth-century medico-psychiatric neurasthenia discourses.²⁰ In the very first paragraph we learn that Aschenbach's energies are on the wane, that he has overstrained his fragile nervous system with his demanding 'brain work' and is now unable to find respite on account of his ceaselessly pulsating 'produzierenden Triebwerkes in seinem Inneren' – a term which does not just gesture to productivity but that also evokes two distinct meanings, one mechanico-physical and one alluding to the Freudian conception of the precarious psychological economies of repressed drives and desires. Aschenbach's personal ailments are further intensified by the 'gefährdende Miene' that seemed to hang over the peace of Europe in the first sentence, which indicates an ominous political menace that both aggravates and externalises the inner turmoil of the writer:

Überreizt von der schwierigen und gefährlichen, eben jetzt eine höchste Behutsamkeit, Umsicht, Eindringlichkeit und Genauigkeit des Willens

¹⁹ Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig und andere Erzählungen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1954, pp. 7–87 (p. 7).

²⁰ See, for example, Wilhelm Erb, *Über die wachsende Nervosität unserer Zeit*, Heidelberg 1884; and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Ueber Gesunde und Kranke Nerven*, 4th revised and expanded edition, Tübingen 1898.

erfordernden Arbeit der Vormittagsstunden, hatte der Schriftsteller dem Fortschwingen des produzierenden Triebwerkes in seinem Innern, jenem 'motus animi continuus', worin nach Cicero das Wesen der Beredsamkeit besteht, auch nach der Mittagsmahlzeit nicht Einhalt zu tun vermocht und den entlastenden Schlummer nicht gefunden, der ihm, bei zunehmender Abnutzbarkeit seiner Kräfte, einmal untertags so nötig war. So hatte er bald nach dem Tee das Freie gesucht, in der Hoffnung, daß Luft und Bewegung ihn wiederherstellen und ihm zu einem ersprießlichen Abend verhelfen würden.²¹

Aschenbach is haunted by a roving restlessness, unable to relax, and we learn that he originally understands his sudden desire to travel abroad as nothing but a burdensome 'hygienische Maßregel', 'die gegen Sinn und Neigung dann und wann hatte getroffen werden müssen', a necessary measure to replenish his depleted bodily and spiritual energy reservoirs.²² Yet Mann makes it obvious that these ideas reflect Aschenbach's limited perspective on the matter, and subtly suggests an alternative interpretation of his character's desire to travel. Through the abundance of death imagery early in the novella,²³ as well as through Aschenbach's telling name ('creek of ashes', a lethargic little stream carrying the powdery residues of burnt matter), Mann indicates that his actions may in fact be driven by the grandest gesture of refusal – a powerful yet unconscious death wish, a desire not to replenish his energies but in fact to exhaust them once and for all in order to find eternal, not just temporary, respite from the vicissitudes of life.

Aschenbach's sense of identity rests above all on his achievement, his iron discipline, and self-denial – his favourite word is 'durchhalten'. We learn that he is plagued by an ominously 'wachsende[n] Müdigkeit', which he fears and conceals from others. As a tribute to his life-long service to 'Geist', 'hatte er das Gefühl gezügelt und erkältet, weil er wusste, daß es geneigt ist, sich mit einem fröhlichen Ungefähr und mit einer halben Vollkommenheit zu begnügen'.²⁴ However, his twin strategy of repression and intellectualisation, which has served Aschenbach well until his fiftieth year, finally demands its levy and later results in his refusal to save his own life. One can therefore read his subsequent refusal to play by the rules as 'primary', in that it counteracts this cultural super-structure, refusing further to honour damaging values and social conventions that demand, much in line with Freud's argument in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930), that we repress a large part of our sexual desires.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 10 and 12.

²³ For an astute analysis of death imagery in *Tod in Venedig*, see, for example, Ritchie Robertson, 'Classicism and its Pitfalls: Death in Venice', in Ritchie Robertson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 95–106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Aschenbach's uncompromising subscription to the achievement principle and the sacrifice of feelings, pleasure, and leisure for his profession is not just a recent development; it has defined him all his life. We learn that he has always done violence to his natural inclinations and physical constitution, and lived a life he was not built to endure and which he could only maintain by a 'heroic' act of discipline and repression. Famously, an observer tells us that he lived his life with his fist firmly closed:

So, schon als Jüngling von allen Seiten auf die Leistung – und zwar die außerordentliche – verpflichtet, hatte er niemals den Müßiggang, niemals die Fahrlässigkeit der Jugend gekannt. Als er um sein fünfunddreißigstes Jahr in Wien erkrankte, äußerte ein feiner Beobachter über ihn in Gesellschaft: 'Sehen Sie, Aschenbach hat von jeher nur so gelebt' – und der Sprecher schloß die Finger seiner Linken fest zur Faust –; 'niemals so' – und er ließ die geöffnete Hand bequem von der Lehne des Sessels hängen. Das traf zu; und das Tapfer-Sittliche daran war, daß seine Natur von nichts weniger als robuster Verfassung und zur ständigen Anspannung nur berufen, nicht eigentlich geboren war.²⁵

It is interesting to note that the 'subtle observer' remarking on Aschenbach's tight-fisted philosophy of life is presumably Austrian, as the scene takes place in Vienna. Once again, we can detect national stereotypes being deployed here, with the much more relaxed Austrian 'Schlendrian' mocking or perhaps pitying the zealous Prussian disciplinarian. The description of his self-discipline as a brave, honourable act shows that Aschenbach considers his work ethic and his sacrifices to be markers of moral superiority, even spiritual supremacy. It is significant in this context that he likens himself to St Sebastian. He thinks of the image of St Sebastian, the patron saint of gay men, '[der] in stolzer Scham die Zähne aufeinanderbeißt und ruhig dasteht, während [ihm] die Schwerter und Speere durch den Leib gehen', as an apt emblem of the writer.²⁶ His reflection on the saint culminates in a hymn to man's perpetual battle with weakness and exhaustion, and he wonders 'ob es überhaupt einen anderen Heroismus gäbe, als denjenigen der Schwäche. Welches Heldentum aber jedenfalls wäre zeitgemäßer als dieses?'²⁷

The narrator and/or Aschenbach (difficult to disentangle at times as they frequently are) reflect on the latter's success as a writer, revealing why his literary works strike a chord with the experiences of so many of his contemporaries. The clue here is in the 'Trotzdem', which indicates nothing but heroic struggle against the forces of exhaustion, pain, and decline:

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Die Menschen wissen nicht, warum sie einem Kunstwerk Ruhm bereiten. [...] der eigentliche Grund ihres Beifalls ist ein Unwägbares, ist Sympathie. Aschenbach hatte es einmal an wenig sichtbarer Stelle unmittelbar ausgesprochen, daß beinahe alles Große, was dastehe, als ein Trotzdem dastehe, trotz Kummer und Qual, Armut, Verlassenheit, Körperschwäche, Laster, Leidenschaft und tausend Hemmnissen zustande gekommen sei. Aber das war mehr als eine Bemerkung, es war eine Erfahrung, war geradezu die Formel seines Lebens und Ruhmes, der Schlüssel zu seinem Werk [...].²⁸

This passage, rendered like the rest of the novella in free indirect discourse punctuated by interventions that systematically blur the boundaries between Aschenbach's and the narrator's perspectives, can be read as a meta-comment that sums up insights Aschenbach has not yet fully grasped, and that also offers a poetological key to the appeal of Mann's novella as a whole: the reason readers appreciate Aschenbach's writings is that they can relate to the experiences he describes – whether that be consciously or unconsciously. Significantly, the main experience shared by Aschenbach and his readers is not related to sexually deviant desires (another theme of the text), but is manifest in the perpetual battle to overcome weakness (both spiritual and physical in nature). In other words, Aschenbach – or indeed the narrator – articulates a kind of burnout pride, the idea that his perpetual struggle with physical and emotional work-induced exhaustion renders him somehow morally superior. Here, work-related exhaustion and our battles with it are elevated to something heroic, even sublime – a praiseworthy act of willpower, the victory of mind over matter, the spirit over the flesh:

Gustav Aschenbach war der Dichter all derer, die am Rande der Erschöpfung arbeiten, der Überbürdeten, schon Aufgeriebenen, sich noch Aufrechthaltenden, all dieser Moralisten der Leistung, die, schwächling von Wuchs und spröde von Mitteln, durch Willensverzückung und kluge Verwaltung sich wenigstens eine Zeitlang die Wirkungen der Größe abgewinnen. Ihrer sind viele, sie sind die Helden des Zeitalters. Und sie alle erkannten sich wieder in seinem Werk, sie fanden sich bestätigt, erhoben, besungen darin, sie wußten ihm Dank, sie verkündeten seinen Namen.²⁹

It is those who fight on at the brink of exhaustion, who, in spite of everything, manage to keep going owing to the triarchy of discipline, willpower, and wise management of their limited energy capital – it is they who are the true 'heroes of our age'.

And yet – and this is where Mann's famous irony strikes – the overall structure and final development of the novella does of course radically undermine Aschenbach's hymn to tenacity and repression. In fact, we could argue that it is precisely his attitude to work which contributes

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

significantly to Aschenbach's later decline – the repressed returns with a cruel vengeance to undo his sustained efforts at 'durchhalten' with a single erotic blow. It is as if he has just stopped trying to battle on, his willpower used up by a life-time of repression. It is his 'Trotzdem' stance that wanes and withers – whether as a result of weakness, of insight, of rebellion, or of sheer exhaustion is left open. We can say, though, that the overvaluation of achievement and productivity, of the 'Moralisten der Leistung' and his disregard for the demands of his body, lead not only to exhaustion, but to *Lebensmüdigkeit*. Aschenbach's perceived heroic and morally superior self-discipline is harshly ridiculed in the end, when we see him reclining in a deckchair at the beach, succumbing unashamedly to his voyeuristic obsession, dressed up in too youthful clothes, his uncanny make-up and hair-dye dripping down his sagging cheeks.

It could, then, also be argued that what resonates not with Aschenbach's readers but with Thomas Mann's, is *not* the act of heroic repression but rather its opposite, that is, Aschenbach's act of giving up, or, perhaps more accurately, giving in, in the end, when he finally rejects the oppressive values and ideologies that have rendered his life unbearable. Yet again, we may therefore either view Aschenbach as a heroic refusenik, or else we may read Mann's tale as primarily cautionary in spirit, warning us that by staking everything on work, and by subscribing to cultural assumptions that ultimately celebrate self-exploitation and work-induced exhaustion, we risk not just the waning of our engagement and our productivity, but in fact our very desire to live. Aschenbach's refusal in the end is passive (he fails to take the necessary actions that ethics and social conventions would dictate) yet primal, as he gives up on everything that had hitherto mattered to him, including the preservation of his own dignity and life.³⁰

Gide's Michel, too, has previously led a sterile intellectual life dedicated exclusively to scholarship, which made him ill, and he experiences a sensual-sexual awakening in Northern Africa, precipitated by the heat, the unfamiliar culture, and his realisation that he loves young boys. It is the sight of youth, in particular, their health and vigour, as well as that of transgressive or even criminal behaviour, that bring Michel back to life. Gradually, he sheds his cultural skins and refuses to abide by ever more social conventions. He shaves off his beard, adopts academically controversial views, abandons his wife in her hour of greatest need, and seeks the company of boys with criminal leanings, even partaking in some of them. The final step of his development leads to him precipitating the death of his sick and rest-craving wife (whether consciously or unconsciously is subject to debate) on a frenzied journey through North

³⁰ The exhaustion-focused reading I present here of *Tod in Venedig* is, of course, only one of many possible readings. Another recent and highly convincing reading with a focus on sexuality-related themes and imagery is by Robert Tobin. It can be found in chapter 7 of *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex*, Philadelphia 2015.

Africa, where he subsequently remains, living at the margins of society with a young boy, having abandoned Western culture and its values for good.

In the cases of both Mann and Gide, the radical rejection of social conventions is represented as an inevitable reaction to repression, primarily sexual in nature, but also as a response to a rigid and soul-destroying work ethic. Both Gide and Mann drew on Nietzsche's model of Apollonian and Dionysian forces, and the danger of an imbalance between the two, which can lead to a complete rejection of order, structure, status, decorum, society, even of life. A Freudian reading would once again suggest that what is being pathologised in Gide's and Mann's texts is not homosexuality, nor sexual desire as such, but rather a socially repressive structure that does not allow individuals to live a wholesome life in which they can find a healthy balance between intellectual and sensual pursuits, and between work and life more generally. Of course, it is also possible to personalise this inability to maintain balance, and to read these two novellas as character studies of pathologically extremist cases, both of whom simply swerve from one side of the psychological spectrum to the other. Again, the refuseniks here allow for readings that either pathologise the systems of values with which they grapple, or else the characters and their particular psychological failings.

And yet it has to be said that readings of Gide's and Mann's texts, as well as of Melville's and Goncharov's, as mere pathological case studies of damaged individuals are ultimately not satisfying, missing, as they do, many of the more nuanced, wider implications about the value systems that led to the acts of 'primary refusals' they depict in the first place. Primary refusals always entail a complex mixture of psychological and social factors, as has recently been illustrated very effectively by Todd Phillips' deeply disturbing film *Joker* (2019). What renders *Joker* essential viewing is precisely that Phillips manages throughout to suggest that his eponymous character's descent into nihilistic murderous madness – in itself perhaps an extreme act of primary refusal in its own right – is the product of an intricate interplay of political, social, genetic, and psycho-sexual factors.

To conclude, one of the features common to most of the refuseniks that we have considered is that they die. This is true of Antigone, Ahab, Kurtz, the Hungerkünstler, Bartleby, Kohlhaas, Aschenbach, Oblomov, and Query. Like the troublesome femme fatale of film noir, the refusenik needs to be killed off if a semblance of the old order is to be restored, although they remain disconcerting spectres even after their deaths. Their afterlives consist in the unsettling disturbance of our assumptions about the most basic of values: the uncritical acceptance of the merit of productivity, of social conventions and status, of engagement, and of the value of human life.

Cyphers of disenchantment and loss, these literary refuseniks signify lost ideals, lost desires, lost motivation, broken wills. They have detached themselves from lives they have deemed non-liveable. They have lost hope not only in the possibility of political change, but, perhaps most

disturbingly, in the possibility of self-improvement. They are all of them anti-self-improvers, and this is deeply troubling, for it is almost unthinkable for most readers today to imagine that the self cannot be improved, that we are doomed to remain the weak and wanting creatures that we are for the rest of our lives. First and foremost, our collective belief in self-improvement is an offspring of our fetishisation of progress. A commonly held assumption in the West is that the world today is better than it was a thousand or even a hundred years ago, and that the many advances in science, technology, and civil rights are indicative of human progress. Most of us think that we are – or else should be – developing as individuals, and that it is within our power to overcome our flaws and to realise our full potential. The assumption that we are, in theory, able to self-improve is deeply rooted in our psyches and firmly embedded in the larger cultural fabric of the West. The belief in the possibility of self-improvement is thus one of our most fundamental cultural convictions. And it is precisely this belief that these literary refuseniks challenge.

The most powerful and haunting literary refuseniks practise a diffuse, Bartleby-esque kind of refusal, a non-systematic, non-organised, non-collective, non-utopian, and non-revolutionary form of protest – it is, of course, telling that only ‘non’-words can aptly capture their conceptually highly complex modes of non-acting. In the case of Bartleby, in particular, we can also observe a perhaps defeatist retreat into the body, the personal, in the form of an inner exile. Deleuze rightly differentiates between figures such as Ahab, driven by a desire to nothingness, making monstrous choices, and ‘saintly hypochondriacs’ such as Bartleby, marked by ‘no will at all, a nothingness of the will rather than a will to nothingness (hypochondriacal “negativism”)’.³¹ And yet, *pace* Deleuze, it is important to emphasise that the pure refusenik is no activist – much as we may like them to be. Instead, the refusenik of Bartleby’s ilk is defined by a complex *mélange* of acedic, nihilist, pessimist, defeatist, and suicidal tendencies. Practising a sort of death in life, ‘indecisively hovering’ in a state of chronic dysfunctionality, the refusenik is too tired to die, and too tired to start a revolution.

³¹ Deleuze, ‘Bartleby, Or, The Formula’ (note 1), p. 80.