

Creative and Destructive Writing

We have retained an unusually dated notion of creation. Often in the Psalms, God is compared to a potter, and sometimes to the potter who smashes his vessel into shards – the latter presumably because it exhibited imperfections. We will return to this. But even though the potter's craft requires that we hack something out of the earth, reshape it and then heat it to high temperatures, all of this is nothing compared to the process of creation which modern physics has been studying. At the very beginning of our universe, the temperature was too great even for the nuclei of helium and hydrogen to form, and certainly too great for electrons to be held by nuclei to allow atoms to form. Then the universe chilled sufficiently to permit helium and hydrogen nuclei to congregate their tiny parishes of energy into centres which could gather electrons around them. So now we have atoms. We have two elements. We ourselves begin to seem like possibilities, however distant, when at some point in the future stars begin to die. We are all of us the offspring of dead stars.

But in the earliest stages of creation, particles and antiparticles hurtle freely about, and collide with one another causing what scientists call annihilation. They can't actually vanish from the system and become nothing, as that word annihilation (with its *nihil* in the middle) implies; that is not permitted according to the law of the conservation of energy. But they cease to be what they were. Their energy re-emerges, reconfigured. Another way of putting this is to say that in the initial stages of creation, an immense amount of destruction takes place. If the potter's hand is shaping all this, then each shaping is matched by an equivalent smashing. Energy expresses itself as particles, which then annihilate one another in their collisions. At a temperature so phenomenal (a

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hundred thousand million degrees) that the mind falters in trying to imagine it, there is no stable matter, only the transmutation of particles violently colliding; an energy of creation which is effectively indistinguishable from the rage of destruction.

It is worth remarking that the earliest cosmogonies seem to have been alert to this mating between creative and destructive forces. The Mesopotamian creation is followed by a deluge which obliterates most of what was created in the first place. And in an echo of that narrative, we have only reached Chapter Six of the Book of Genesis when the cataclysm arrives in the form of the Flood. The potter's eye, it seems, has seen its own creation and found it irremediably flawed. The pot will be smashed into fragments. The vivid imagination, what Coleridge called the 'esemplastic power', understood long before science could calculate and express the matter that creation and destruction are not separate realms: far from it; they constitute two hemispheres which only create a world when they are brought together. If creation and destruction are in fact opposites, then they are necessary opposites, dialectically dependent opposites. William Empson reminds us constantly throughout his work that the term 'opposite' is a troublesome late addition to human thought. The notion of opposition seems straightforward enough when used astronomically, to signify the position of two heavenly bodies with a difference in longitude of 180 degrees, but when used of creation and destruction, the matter soon clouds. 'A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.' So wrote Oscar Wilde in his essay 'The Truth of Masks'. This was also the belief of the great Danish physicist Niels Bohr in regard to the important statements of science: if a truth is large enough, then its opposite is also true. When he was awarded the Danish Order of the Elephant, Bohr chose as his motto:

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Contraria Sunt Complementa. Opposites complement one another. But to do so they need to retain all their critical force. Energy is only generated, as in an electrical circuit, when opposites are brought into communication. David Jones called his last great work *The Anathemata*, a word which is an emblem of its own meeting of opposites. The *anathemata* are the accursed things, which are also venerated, set aside, revered, made holy. As Regina Schwartz points out in her study of Milton, hallowing begins when something is set aside, and some etymologists have traced the idea of creation in Hebrew, *bara*, to the idea of cutting, dividing, separating.¹

In art, said Picasso, one must always kill the father. We still remember *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, that quintessential act of the modern mind, as much for the vividness of its destruction as for the form of its creation. In any meaningful act of creation, we must continually be smashing things to bits. The potter hurls his vessel against the stone and it shatters into fragments. The god sees the flaw in his own creation and resolves to be done with it and start again. Wherever art can be said to have a history, then it is a history of the development of its own conventions to the point of destruction; otherwise there would merely be stasis, as there is for example in certain traditions, like that of icon painting. Such an art has a chronology which is additive and repetitive, rather than developmental. If the play *Hamlet* had simply obeyed the laws of revenge tragedy from which it started, then it would not be being performed, at numerous venues across the world, at this moment. The serious art we have grown used to views convention the way a butcher views a carcass. We have already quoted Pound's famous

¹ Regina M. Schwartz, *Remembering and Repeating: Biblical Creation in 'Paradise Lost'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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instruction, 'Make it new', and in his own personalizing way, Yeats agreed when he wrote: 'It is myself that I remake.'

So let me abandon all coyness forthwith and make the link. When what we call creative writing is bad, it is frequently so not because it is not 'creative' enough, but because it is not 'destructive' enough; not nearly destructive enough. It wishes to engage in a lengthy creative embrace with itself. It is flogging a dead horse and stroking a dead dog, when it should be digging holes for both rotting corpses and burying the pair of them. In the making of our universe creation and destruction are inseparable; in any form of serious writing, the same rule applies. Another way of saying this is to state that writing, whether it is deemed to be 'creative' or not, can never afford to be less than intelligent, and intelligence characterizes itself by constantly wielding the blade against its own certainties, flummery and effusions. It is not possible to be intelligent without being self-critical; it is sometimes possible to be inventive, exuberant, entertaining even, but not intelligent. Expression in writing must be complemented at all times by the critical instinct, which we might think of as intelligence in its destructive mode; the analytic mind does not trouble itself overmuch with pity, and all criticism - including self-criticism - is a form of analysis. When writing is entirely positive, without any destructive element, it will tend automatically towards sentimentality and insipidity; which is to say that it will be bad writing, though no doubt 'affirmative'. There is, of course, a kitsch of affirmation, just as there is a kitsch of sorrow and regret. Sentimental insipidity can characterize a piece of writing about child abuse (a recent favourite) as much as it can the intimate history of a favoured teddy bear. It is not subject matter, but style, which separates sentimental and bad writing from the asperities required of

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any intelligent composition in words.

There is a touching moment when Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville are walking on a beach near Liverpool. Melville, according to Hawthorne's account, had 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.' Out of that struggle between the opposition of belief and unbelief came his finest work. Melville was dubious about those who want to say 'Yes' in literature, who wish to be purely affirmative; he championed instead those who say 'NO in Thunder'. In his book of poems about the American Civil War, he relates as much to the Confederate cause as to the Union, even though his political sympathies were very much in favour of the latter. The *anathemata*, we might recall, are things both beloved and accursed; both trampled down and elevated. Creativity meets the destructiveness of its own critique coming in the opposite direction: in Opposition, said Blake, lies true friendship. At the moment that Blake discovered this in writing, Joseph Priestley was discovering that such opposition facilitated the flow of an electric current, and a couple of decades later we would be treated to the neologisms *anode* and *cathode*.

Let us look at another, radically different, example of how destructiveness is part of the intricate threading of creation. Some of R. S. Thomas's poems are shorter, or certainly no longer, than many of the inscriptions chiselled on tombstones in a mason's yard. Why is it then that one does not usually expect to find any of the poet's lines included among the inscriptions on polished granite? One phrase should be enough to tell us: in his poem 'Carol' he speaks of 'charity's scarecrow', a phrase sufficient in itself to announce the destructive intelligence, that refusal to make all the required affirmative noises even at a time of

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grief, that readiness to say 'NO in Thunder' which Melville so admired. Thomas's belief (and he was, after all, an Anglican clergyman) was troubled on all sides by doubt and self-questioning. This must have made him troublesome at times as a repairer of souls, but it is what turns his verse into poetry.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay 'On The Destructive Character',² spoke of the way in which destruction is necessary to clear a way through the debris which perennially surrounds us. This might be useful. We are all already situated in language before we ever start writing, not merely situated in it, but mired in it; saturated by a medium which is inescapable. Writing has to be critical, which is to say destructive, to clear a way for itself; otherwise it will remain merely a part of the mire. This is a unique difficulty of writing. Language for the serious writer has to become a form of resistance to the linguistic mire which surrounds us. It must challenge any conventionality of utterance. Such conventionality is the mire, and we should try to understand what that mire is: it is not the mire of witlessness; far from it. An astonishing amount of wit has gone into creating the mire, which aims to cajole and beckon and, in sinking us, to separate us from our critical faculties. Unintelligent in the larger sense it may be, but it is not short of cunning. A large part of learning to write is the process whereby we become increasingly critical of our own inherited usage, our casual daily utterance. The advice, 'You should write that down' never really works: writing has its own formal requirements, its own demands and necessities, and there are remarkably few people who speak with such precision that a literal transcription of their talk can be read

² In Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (1979; London: Verso, 1997).

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satisfactorily at any length. The reason avid reading is inseparable from good writing is that one has to study how other writers have cleared a way through the debris, how they have fashioned a mode of writing, or a style if you prefer, through an intelligent critique of the language in which they find themselves located; through an unreadiness to let oneself off the hook, which is to say a painful avoidance of all the openings provided by linguistic predictability, and unconsidered utterance. This is a large part of the training of the writer.

Let us consider for a moment what Shakespeare does to King Lear, in a play which is surely a supreme example of 'creative art'. The old man goes from being a king of the land to being an exiled king of language. And he takes his chorus with him in the form of the Fool. Adding his own notes to the chorus is Edgar, *aka* Mad Tom, mimicking the ravings of a Bedlamite. What a high court of the realm they constitute between them now. What was meant to be an act of historic generosity, the king's headstrong insistence on dividing up his kingdom between his daughters, has instead turned into a catastrophe of insult and alienation. The one good daughter lives in exile while the other two, who have turned out to be no better than they should be, plot, manoeuvre and collude to humiliate the king, and to vie for the affections of Edmund. Just listen to the riot of creation meeting destruction head-on in this scene from Act Three, when this bare, forked creature is on the Heath with what is left of his retinue.

Edgar: Away! The foul fiend follows me! Through the sharp hawthorn blow the winds. Hum! Go to thy bed and warm thee.

Lear: Did'st thou give all to thy daughters?
And art thou come to this?

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Edgar: Who gives anything to poor Tom? Whom the foul fiend hath led through fire and through flame, through ford and whirlpool, o'er bog and quagmire, that hath laid knives under his pillow, and halters in his pew, set ratsbane by his porridge, made him proud of heart, to ride on a bay trotting-horse over four-inched bridges, to course his own shadow for a traitor. Bless thy five wits! Tom's a-cold. O, do de, do de, do de. Bless thee from whirlwinds, star-blasting and taking! Do poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes: there could I have him now - and there - and there again, and there.

Storm still

Lear: What! Has his daughters brought him to this pass?
Couldst thou save nothing? Wouldst thou give 'em all?

Fool: Nay, he reserved a blanket, else we had been all shamed.

Lear: Now, all the plagues that in the pendulous air
Hang fated o'er men's faults light on thy daughters!

Kent: He hath no daughters, sir!

Lear: Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdued nature
To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.
Is it the fashion that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! 'Twas this flesh begot

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Those pelican daughters.

Edgar: Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill:

Alow, alow, loo, loo!

Fool: This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

Two acts before, these had been kings, statesmen, favoured sons. All their needs had been legitimate. Now look at them. The glory of the language is brought about by the fracturing and laying waste of age-old social relationships and loyalties. Creativity and destructiveness are once more indissolubly joined.

It might be instructive for us to consider Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*, one of the least sentimental, least spuriously affirmative poems ever written. John Ruskin thought it the greatest work of art in any form these islands had ever produced. Let us ask of that poem the questions we have broached above. Firstly, what is the debris Pope feels he must find his way through? What makes his creative writing so destructive that it has become exemplary? First off is the 'creative writing' that surrounds him. Here he is on the subject in his *Epistle to Arbuthnot*:

Fire in each eye, and Papers in each hand,
They rave, recite, and madden round the land.

No great enthusiasm for the churning out of verse as a therapeutic or life-affirming exercise here then. Pope examined it in terms of its competence, and found most of it severely wanting. 'Competence' in verse has grown harder and harder to judge, as expectations of strict formality have been abandoned, though I remember once

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watching the late Ken Smith making his way through a pile of entries to a poetry competition with a briskness which would surely have astounded the entrants. Twenty seconds per sheet was long enough to establish whether or not there was any serious engagement with the language here; whether the destructive element had met the creative one head-on, and parleyed. Most of the submitted 'poems' were merely mouthing the locutions of the time, this time in ink, and so could be summarily discarded. Samuel Beckett often made the distinction between writing and talk. So much of writing, in his view, was mere talk; talk that happened to have been written down; the age's prattle typeset.

In *The Dunciad* Pope borrows all he needs for structure and subject matter from Homer, *The Aeneid*, Dryden's *MacFlecknoe* and from the Lord Mayor's Procession each year in London. Then he gathers up every figure in literary life with whom he has had a quarrel (which was most of them, in Pope's case) and starts fashioning his magnificently poisonous phrases. It is the unforgivingness of intelligence, in its destructive mode of analysis and criticism, that fashions such a compelling imagery of denunciation. The constant associations of worthless productions in literature with feculent currents in the Thames, with dead or decomposing matter of one sort or another, produce a riot of invention:

This labour past, by Bridewell all descend,
(As morning-pray'r and flagellation end)
To where Fleet-ditch with disemboгуing streams
Rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to Thames,
The King of Dykes! Than whom, no sluice of mud
With deeper sable blots the silver flood.

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The creativity here, indeed what might also be called 'the beauty of the verse', is inseparable from its destructive intent and action. The 'silver flood' evidently conjures all the silver-tongued writers of antiquity, and the dead dogs who contribute their sable blots to the staining of that mighty tradition have become a metonymy for the pack of howling versifiers who rave, recite and madden round the land. To borrow William Empson's phrase about Thomas Love Peacock in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, these are poets who first make a cradle and then rock themselves in it. Pope sees his job as going around making sure that, by the time he's finished, down will come cradle, baby and all. He can afford no sentimentality here, which is to say that every line of creativity must contain its quotient of animus; the creativity, which is considerable, is dialectically complicit with its own destructiveness. So it seems we are back where we started. This is how worlds begin.

Now Pope's target, Duncery, is hard to define, though we are undoubtedly confronted with at least as much duncery in our society as Pope was in his, and it requires all the destructiveness of a ruthless critique, all the forces of our analytic intelligence, to resist it. It might seem odd at first glance that the Roman Catholic Pope should choose a word so often hurled abusively at his co-religionists. The word derives from John Duns Scotus, the Subtle Doctor, who epitomized for the Reformers the hair-splitting refinements of the Schoolmen, those who had strayed altogether too far from what scripture and the primitive church offered and vouchsafed. As Tyndale puts it in his *Pentateuch*: 'They which in tymes paste were wont to loke on no more Scripture then they founde in their duns or soch like develysh doctrine.' Tyndale was not given to beating about the bush. And as late as 1581 in Marbeck's *Book of Notes*, the connection with Roman Catholicism is explicit: 'The Dunce-men and Sophisters...the inventers

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and finders, yea, and the very makers of Purgatorie.' By Milton's time the term is less denominational, though just as abusive: 'It were a great folly to seeke for counsel ... from a Dunce Prelat' (*Church Government*).³ But Pope's immediate precursor is undoubtedly the Dryden of *MacFlecknoe*:

Even I, a dunce of more renown than they,
Was sent before but to prepare his way.

The 'he' here is Shadwell, poor fellow. It really does not do to get on the wrong side of great poets in the history of literature: all anyone will ever recall of you is their superior rhyme and ridicule. For every person who reads a line of Shadwell today, a thousand others will recall Dryden's splendid rancour:

The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But Shadwell never deviates into sense.

For Pope the meaning of dunce and duncery has become ecumenical. It is now anyone whose incessant reasoning manages to obliterate rather than elucidate the object of study; or whose writing, however 'creative', is designed not to clarify existence, but merely to fill up the silence:

Keen, hollow winds howl thro' the bleak recess,
Emblem of Music caus'd by Emptiness.

There's still plenty of that music around, and it has not grown any quieter in the intervening years. The emblems these days blare out from the ringtones of mobile phones;

³ All the quotations here are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

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now there is a music caused by emptiness, if ever there was one, the emptiness of a volume of communication far in excess of any requisite content.

Lewis Theobald, Pope's first target, glosses and annotates Shakespeare to the point where Shakespeare disappears. There is undoubtedly a comfort to be had in antiquarianism, in the retrieval of those objects time has buried, in their collection and their annotation. One can easily spend a lifetime playing the antiquarian with Shakespeare, and rewardingly too; as long as one never forgets that the essence of Shakespeare is not antiquarian. He was the least antiquarian of writers, in that he grabbed what he wanted and needed from the past and made present use of it for his dramas. The famous clock in *Julius Caesar*, whether deliberated or not, announces that dramatic effect takes precedence over chronological exactitude. Pope would always emphasize the dramatic effect, where Theobald would merely footnote the anachronism.

And what of the *Variorum Dunciad*? It was Swift who first pointed out to Pope that most of his references would not be understood by any soul twenty miles outside the liberties of London. So why not attach notes of cod-learning, a scholarly machinery like that which surrounded editions of the classics, particularly Bentley's edition of Horace in 1710? Once Pope started on this gambit, he could not give it up, until with the addition of Book Four and the final *Variorum* of 1743, we have a book which is a mockery of books, a satire taunting all contemporary satires, a book which to a considerable extent presents itself as an anti-book. This is a book which foils its own forthcoming criticisms by preceding them. Pope gets his retaliation in first. Built into its text is a prolepsis of its own posterity. Now this had already happened, if in a different manner, with Swift's *Tale of A Tub*, another work which deliberately

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parodies the conventions of book creation, printing and footnoting, particularly in the fifth edition of 1710. In Pope's case, to begin with anyway, part of what is being mocked is that urge to annotate to death a living literature. Pope's first target, as we have seen, was Lewis Theobald, editor of Shakespeare, and in Pope's view a rabid over-annotator. That Pope is grossly unfair to Theobald is here beside the point; it is Pope we read two and a half centuries later, not Theobald. All serious literature is constantly meeting itself coming the other way, like the particle meeting the antiparticle in the moment of physical creation. All creditable 'style' is constantly putting itself into question. All intelligent books play with the idea of turning themselves into anti-books. Eliot asks himself in *Four Quartets* what the late November is doing with the disturbance of the Spring, and then he halts to remark that 'that was a way of putting it' and that it was 'not very satisfactory...' The function of this manoeuvre is to acknowledge that all writing is a manoeuvre; that there is no innocent place left to occupy in terms of writing as pure expression. We acknowledge, through self-consciousness, our indispensable knowledge of the tradition. And our self-consciousness should become a type of critique; which is to say, that our creativity is conjoined, inevitably, to destructiveness.

The identical strategy underlies most of *The Dunciad*, and the reversals between pious expectation and sordid reality are enacted through the dialectic of the couplet. Dialectics imply that reality is never single; that every statement effectively contains its opposite, that truth itself may be thought of as oppositional, complementary, an ongoing argument rather than a certainty placed beyond question. Questioning is at the root of dialectics, the Greek word for argument, and it is what makes the procedure radical, since that last word comes from the Latin *radix*

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meaning root. Insofar as writing is dialectical, it can never be creative without simultaneously being destructive; what it lifts up, it must also strike down. The venerated object must also be, in some sense, accursed, like Lear on the heath; or like the *anathemata*. The stateliness of the language in *The Dunciad*, the grand machinery of its rhyming pentameters, sets the linguistic stage as the mighty procession of the Queen of Dulness and her subjects sets the visual one, for a sequence of apocalyptic reversals. All our expectations about culture and enlightenment are turned upside down. The light at the centre of the word enlightenment is the lifelong enemy of the dullards and pedants and versifiers whose rituals and pageants Pope celebrates so darkly. The darkness is a brilliant one, and Pope even borrows Milton's phrase 'darkness visible' from *Paradise Lost*:

Yet, yet a moment one dim Ray of Light
Indulge, dread Chaos, and eternal Night!
Of darkness visible so much be lent,
As half to shew, half veil the deep Intent.
Ye Pow'rs! whose Mysteries restor'd I sing,
To whom Time bears me on his rapid wing,
Suspend a while your Force inertly strong,
Then take at once the Poet and the Song.

Before we leave Pope we might remark the precision of the verse, and his awareness that a good poet needs to be abreast of the thought of his time. That last couplet with its 'inertly strong' refers to the universal law of gravity, recently propounded by Isaac Newton, whose work the poet revered. Pope also made use of Newton's work on optics; as Maynard Mack put it, you will find in his work

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no confusion between the words effulgence and refulgence.⁴ One of the most fatuous phrases ever uttered is 'poetic license'. A poet whose language is not in a constant search for precision is a bad poet.

Perhaps the most famous exemplar of the function of negativity in literature, certainly in our time, is Samuel Beckett. Beckett made failure and difficulty his theme. His recommendation regarding writing is terse and memorable: 'Ever tried, ever failed? No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' One might note that, although written in prose, this mantra is in fact a rhyming couplet. Beckett in *Krapp's Last Tape* hints at how he came to understand that the things he had been avoiding, failure and loss, were in fact his theme, once he'd had the courage to grasp them. The one victor in Beckett's world, whether dramatic or fictional, is always language. Language is inexhaustible. Its resources transcend any plot or anti-plot.

In one of the first stories he ever published, 'Dante and the Lobster' in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, the character Belacqua fails to translate Dante, fails to charm his Italian teacher into translating a troublesome passage, and fails to notice that the lobster he is delivering to his aunt, so that he might consume it with her later, is in fact alive. When he realizes this, he is filled with horror, to the dismay of his practical relative. She who cooks the lobster cannot afford to be sentimental; he who eats it can, providing enough distance exists between the two activities. Then he discovers how the creature must die: it will be immersed in boiling water, to extinction. Belacqua reaches for a little easy comfort, but the text itself contradicts him. Negativity overcomes the facile affirmation:

⁴ Quoted in Marjorie Nicolson and G. S. Rousseau, *"This Long Disease, My Life": Alexander Pope and the Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 266.

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Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all.

It is not.

Between the two paragraphs we see the dialectic in action. And we never do receive an adequate translation of Dante's phrase - '*qui vive la pieta quando e ben morte*' - which is perhaps untranslatable. We are back with the dialectic between the inscriptions in the mason's yard and the poetry of R. S. Thomas. Creativity in writing needs always to be wary of itself; destructiveness is its necessary complement. *Contraria Sunt Complementa*. In the opposition between the creative and the destructive force in writing lies our only hope. Take away one and you have sentimentality, mawkishness and kitsch; take away the other and you have cynicism, which rapidly becomes as wearisome as kitsch. Creativity separated from destructiveness leads to that fatuous affirmation of which Melville was so distrustful; destructiveness without creativity is the voice of resentment. Resentment is a fascinating subject, indeed a motor of history, according to Nietzsche, but it requires a whole book to itself.