

rooting for mephistopheles, contemptuous of faust

HAMM: Scoundrel! Why did you engender me?

NAGG: I didn't know.

HAMM: What didn't you know?

NAGG: That it'd be you.

Beckett, *Endgame*

narco-philosophes

Ever since Pablo Escobar started collecting his work, Büttner couldn't get rid of him.

(Olive Garden) *Werner, you gotta meet my plastic surgeon. Fabulous guy. Need to disappear yourself? Lam it in plain sight? He's your man.*

(SCORES: 4am) *Werner, stop worrying so much, "it's out of your hands."* Hmm ... the Rubik's Revenge of existential riddles, or a rare form of self-love whose only lubricant is social? (Exactly: *tough call.*) *Friction-at-a-distance?* Cuts down on alone-time, Büttner guessed, but all 'n all, a huge time-saver, if only he could get the colors to match up on his Five-Sided Fistagon. *Thanks, Pablo!*

Escobar was reliably flush with gnostic bullshit like this, but Büttner had to give it to him: Aztec Terrorista or Spanish Harlem Mona Lisa, brown-eyed girls were the best, yo. Always the best view, the best chance *for you* to ever bask in charm's glow, for the bait required no wit, whatsoever – the lure, no breath of any kind, actually – spinning solely, here, on the dilation of a single pupil. In silico-millennio, or old-school in vivo, from what Büttner saw onstage, brown-eyed girls were no doubt the Conquistadoras of yore: window-givers onto double-paned worlds themselves winterized to muffle the racket of ascension within. *Valkyries.* Your average Teutonic-hottie with a clean credit-record and

a filthy mouth, counting cards, counting jackpots, to be sure; but now in sepia-drag, a melancholy baby: so many soft palace-coups wrapped in a Trojan horse of sweet taboo – your *Streetcar Named Despair*. The Catwoman of chi-burglars, yeah, but look at her work that pole. *The sky was all purple, there were people runnin' everywhere ...*

There were moments in the flow not unlike this, where Büttner detected in the pattern-collapse a chasm of silence that could not, *would not*, be breached. But this was merely charm's cue; charm getting ready for its close-up. Adapt, evolve, become: this persistence of immanence insistently weaponized Büttner's own sinuous charm, brought its edges into eloquence. For what was charm, really, if not modesty & perversity held together by a system of cantilevered stresses and companionable counterweights circling each other well after dark, well past last call.

Escobar's talent for exploiting his own people, for alienating entire governments, was truly admirable, Büttner decided. Legendary. But his *style*? Subtle like a brick through a window. *Brusque*. A little pushy even, Büttner had to admit. Not all that charming after all. Büttner didn't think he'd have to drive a tank into the Columbian Parliament, or blow up a plane to get his work out there. *Chill, Pablo. Slow it down, mi amigo*. Where Büttner was more the "radical human disengagement type" – *The Final Withdrawal*, on occasion, in the thermodynamic pain & energy bank, the clearing out of that account (*some really out-there Howard Hughes-type shit*) – Escobar, meanwhile, was down in the barrio shaking hands, passing out cash, all man of the people. He had that whole "relatable" thing going on.

Büttner got it; he used to have friends like that back in the day. Political prisoners trapped in the cell-block of their own making, doing *25-to-Life*, crapped-out on appeal. Büttner was a recluse – castle-bound, in fact. But he never consigned himself to solitary. Those who make a habit of chanting *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here*, while swinging a large brass bell, usually have an exit strategy, lead the flock out of harm's way. The banks, the tanks, the corporations. The debt, the drones, the corporations.

Who cares about the past worn smooth by error and friction?

Still, Büttner thought, perhaps they were not that different after all. Shared the same internal fatal error, faced the same failures to communicate on the day to day. Simply: *felt too much*. At any rate, he sympathized; knew people generally misunderstood Escobar, reflexively thought: *bulls on parade*, thought Escobar a mere soapbox for the

ego, a paper-mache atoll from which, bullhorn in hand, he might bully himself into acclaim, drown out the dreamers and his own doubting mind. Thought Escobar's talent was for casting the widest net over the shallowest, most desperate pool, ensnaring Moby and mackerel, alike. Which it kinda was. But real talent, Büttner knew, was other and distinct from this. No bull itself, it was never interested in scaring anyone into a shocked submission, nor did it traffic in intimidation of any kind. Rather, talent wanted to help the bull out, remove the crown of thorns from its tender hoof, gently hold its martyred foot.

(SUPERCUTS) *Werner, The Men of Always aren't interested in The Children of Never.* No mention of the children of Not-Never – of the double-negative. The children of Never Never Land slouching perilously toward Negativland, about to rob a liquor store, car-jack your Porsche. *The Children Doubly-Fucked.*

God's-Eye-View of World-as-Favela: Koyaanisqatsi meets POWER/KNOWLEDGE, the narco way. Life seriously out of balance, if not completely out of whack. (Note to self: *call Philip Glass.*) Pablo Escobar, his friend and patron, the ugly duckling whose quack or *cri de coeur-on command* now struck Büttner as the saddest song of myself – all three power chords wailing in unison. Perhaps, circa 2016, even the objective emblem of life under the new cruel of law, our casual urban cannibalism abjected, *made more real*, run amok – resistance made pre-emptively feudal.

Was cannibalism an act of dominance or merely its purest expression, the feral distillate?

People were not instruments to be played, this much Büttner knew. You couldn't press their valves or pluck their strings with any regularity and expect to hear the notes that you wanted. Expect a comforting arpeggio of melodic intuition to ring out like answered prayers. Flute music. Oh no. In order to help people, Büttner had long realized, it helped to know yourself by not focusing on your *self* – to avoid making a fetish of your *So-Called Inner Life*. To not carve your pain, that is, into a jade pagoda of pomp & splendor under which the *Sorrows of Young Werner* would rain down on you like cherry blossoms, blanketing your inadequacies in soft, dewy petals, all the while converting the stacked bulk of the planet's misery into soothing, compensatory metaphor.

The metaphor that explained how you were a cutter in a world that favored glocks over razors; a subculture of one, who saw in the emphatic punctuation of semi-automatic

spray, an ecstatic shattering to the exclusion of all else, that zero-sum old black magic: *in a spin, that's the spin you're in*. The loneliest little lyric in the world whose longing on a large scale fueled its affirmative rhetorical push: *Who can love you like me?*

Escobar reminded Büttner of one of his own paintings from '87: *Nice day in the life of two thalidomide victims*. Büttner at the prime of his "emotional amputee" period. Think: *dove grey*. Vapor, but with stumps. Picture: open water, dead calm, your last nocturnal emission, weaponized and turned against you. Pollock's best wet bed: drowning *not* waving. *Kind* of a people painting, I guess. A couple – now detached. Unfortunately, from their own sockets. Going for the neo-platonic thing, looks like – *FORMLESS*. Gonna see how that works out (*everyone needs boundaries*).

Headless, faceless, limbless – less anything you might need to qualify yourself as human. *Buoys*. Vaguely post-minimal, in that regard. Shades of ... well, shades drawn. Pod-people Kabuki-miming the Kantian-sublime: *the abyss you could not miss*. Old reliable. Mr. Void. *There was no pretending for these two*. People, pupa, panic – they weren't so dissimilar. *Raisinets*, and yet, potent & distinct, meat envelopes with dreams. Beef jerky dangling from this mortal coil, wrapping it around each other's necks like a tourniquet. Life didn't amount to a hill of beans, but here it did. Büttner trauma-tooling through the 20th Century trainwreck: *'Cuz they say two-thousand zero zero party over, oops out of time ...*

Synopsis: Virtuoso *shit-creek*. "Without-ness" of *paddle*, hard to miss. Theme: *You gotta know when to hold 'em. Know when to fold 'em*. Execution: *the dress rehearsal for your own?*

Bonus points for prescient hints of current precariat. Rating: B+. Kid's got promise.

A beautiful boy, might wanna watch the swagger.

Jury says?

"Werner Büttner's punishing psychic tundras doubtless mark him as that subtlest beast, a talented oppressor in the abiding sea of me, the reaper of shrunken, Delaware hearts. *Nunc fluens facit tempus, nunc stans facit aeternitatum*, indeed. Ah, yes ... 'The now that passes produces time, the now that remains produces eternity.' Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* 524 A.D."

(Too true. *True dat*’.)

“In Büttner’s work, we bear witness to a state-sponsored actor, now reformed. Once, this cunning refugee from the East merely comprised the fissile material used to fuel the capitalist centrifuge. Today, he’s a *rara avis* poised on the cusp of re-entry in the welcoming West – *Marlborough, Inc.*, the most genial of docents: *Dahling, this is what you came for. If not, we don’t know why you’re here.* Alas, we are afforded the chance to get up-close & personal, touch the actual isotope, rattle the bird’s cage, witness the hoovering up of whole lives on the atomic level. In each of his paintings, expertly rendered in Büttner’s coolly-suave hands (*always the summa of sardonic*), one is instantly made aware that there are no consoling fictions – in *SPACE*, nor the ripples within your dog’s bowl as he gently laps away at it – and Boethius’ own philosophy, for lack of a better term, finally revealed to be a gross impostor in the most fragile of corrals. Taken collectively, Büttner’s latest suite of paintings seem to say:

Have you seen the placid face of a Kenyan marathoner in mid-stride? Clocked the Easter Island of that mind? They knew there was no finish line, not really.”

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Time: fate’s pendulum swing – was the arrow winding up this year, or his cuckoo-clock unhinged? Büttner often produced the word like a gold coin between his teeth. Spoke it aloud as if dredging some exotic creature from the dark lagoon of his consciousness. Held its resonance in front of him like a totem or a charm, something to ward off the vulpine baying, still his own chronic barking, the skeptical bite lodged within his dentures. A vague ache. (*What was old age, anyway, if not a kind of jaded infancy?*) *Time*: *you had it or you didn’t.* *Time*: *pretty sure he didn’t even wear a watch.* *Time*: Büttner was a survivor of the *Before & After* of Christ’s death; about *time*, that is all ye need know. Still, it broke a brother’s heart to see him strung up and hung up in garlands of false avant-gardes like so much strange, low-hanging fruit – overripe and dying on the vine Tuesday, scheduled for immaculate resurrection the Tuesday after next.

For over thirty years, the German painter had seen the asylum choir whip up a dialectic, run contra to it, then keep on running, skylarking from one anxious asteroid to another at warp speed, nose pressed to the action’s glass – a kind of Médecins Sans Frontières

dispatched to perform triage on the aesthetic body wherever it found itself in crisis – maintaining the mythos, managing the moving parts. Like a cautionary apparition, a cataract in the crystal vision, the asylum choir was supersonic and on it: *the coming deluge*. As they moved through darkness on velvet torpedoes in search of *The Critical Condition*, chrome-9 quiet-storm trailing their wake, they gave Büttner every impression of having plenty of places to go, but no place to actually *be* – writing circles, for sure, just not around things. *Burn baby burn*, or – *shake shake shake* – there was an inferno going on somewhere, and it felt suspiciously like disco.

Everything is so wonderful to see, so terrible to be... sighed Büttner, taking little satisfaction in the chain reaction of bodies. Satisfaction? – *uh ... no no, no.*

The spark spinning in extremis which wrapped the asylum choir in a cloak of fire – enlivened and live-wired it – turned out to have its own Jekyll-like morphologies to contend with. It, too, swung from a rope. Danced around poles. Went off its Lithium for weeks at a time. Saw conspiracy in the cloud cover (*what is it obscuring?*) What Büttner had called: *“the excitement in the fog”*. Began to lose language, then meaning, then semblances of meaning, and finally, the verdict itself: abstract as an ice cube now, inscrutable as the polar melt. *The Fire This Time*, a candle flickering in the wind, twinkling, turning on dimes, turning on pennies from heaven with perfect ease into that junkie with a superpower dispensing vigilante justice in the falsely-imperiled Gotham of his own comfortable middle class imagination, shaking your dungeon to the core. You could roffie yourself and record the results, but who would know?

Soon the asylum choir began practicing what Büttner considered a debased form of clumsy lepidoptery, often mistaking engineering for intuition, a Monarch for a moth, blithely pinning down both inside the same glass box – *Danaus plexippus: Symbol with periorbital Hematoma*. A weatherproof butterfly whose resolve was not so much steely, but anodized – bendy and flexible like aluminum; a Tin Man’s grip. No one’s idea of bullet-proof. (*What hath thou wrought?*) Büttner stood in the center of this blizzard of taxonomic confusion more times than he cared to remember. This thrilling to *The Greater Polynomial* that was the dying of the light and its hearkening, too. Did his best to hyperspace out of harm’s way. Like *Coyote & Road Runner*, a pathological dynamic chasing its own co-dependent tail if ever there was one, Büttner often found himself wondering: “Who’s Zoomin’ Who?”

Road Runner, the Coyote's after you / Road Runner, if he catches you you're through.

So why was Coyote the one always left clutching the anvil in the air? Weightless and zero-gravity-ecstatic one second, then soul-cycling for dear life seconds after that? Why did the gun always go off in *his* hand, the detonator blow up in *his* face?

Toot-toot, hey! Beep-beep!

Marienbad-of-the-mind for precocious toddlers, or resounding echo of an *El Greco-effect* boomeranging back at him at light-speed – revved up in the wrong way? Of the collateral damage from so many botched coronations dumped on the street in piles, now hastily gathered up and reified, made new in gaunt, withered flesh? A kind of Situationist-derive of the senses, par excellence, signaling the concept-creep of simian devolution in real time: first erect, then hunched over, then sucker-punched into a prone position – *sprawled out by default*. A curb sandwich, Büttner was surprised to find out, that you could not eat.

So many thin lines demarcated the contours of *The Marrow Industry*, these days, lent a flattering silhouette to its atavistic impulse to consolidate and acquire. So many soft, porous boundaries within *The Dollar Ministry* itself, between love & hate, friend & foe, tooth & tusk – between the Brokeback questioning-bi, and those that were simply greedy and omnivorous with their sensuality. On the *Praise or Bury?* continuum of what to do with Caesar, Büttner had always been staunchly with the ditch-diggers, but this Suez Canal of shit-storms, right here, was getting out of hand. Surely, Caligula would have blushed at the body count, built a few aqueducts, cried out “Palpitation Time!” then sent the Centurions out to find another daisy-chain of double-barreled trigger-hippies to polish the chrome on his dagger.

Even the cheek-turners were caught off guard, stumped by the rearrangement of derangements. *Even the buses were throwing themselves under themselves.*

Choose your delusion, or illusion, or that custom jack-o-lantern with an accelerated bespoke grimace – *Fate*, in Büttner's experience, often rested on a finger, a sign of *their* times, not yours. Often turned on the double-jointed anointed's trembling digits (the priests, prophets and parishioners assimilated into one) – *your pulse*, their finger. In our art world, our World of Art, our community, our tribal clan, our ruthless cabal of makers faking it until they finally broke through, Büttner had risked quiet indictments for paying

insufficient homage, been *j'accused* of tithing too much; his paintings declared overcooked or undernourished as the winds blew, as only the Prince of Tides knew.

But what his paintings had been trying to tell me all along, was – yes, in his experience, there *were* actual ghosts waterwalking among us in plain sight; that our Polterzeitgeist was littered with would-be windtalkers and wannabe Shogun-gunslingers of all kinds, dim wraiths whose antics you could not cancel no matter how hard you tried. And from what Büttner could see, it usually boiled down to this: win, place, or show – aftermath & afterglow. How was your sun? Where was your sun? Sure your sun was shining? Still solar frightening? The end of your tears, same time next year? The driest martini, sir, distilled from your fear?

Who wouldn't invest in these prophecies, burn sage, burn the occasional house down, torch whole villages, just to get it, just to feel it?

Soleil-olé: The what? of your sun.

But smoke did not signal fire for Büttner; it did not precede it. Rather, gusting solar winds, lodged within the crease of his own wreck, signaled a self-immolating turn of mind within himself and the culture at large, a cruel lust for the epiphanic disturbance for its own obstreperous sake to ward off creeping ennui; to keep shit real. Jokers. Jackals. Mischief-makers with a grudge. Anarchic desublimation as longing and lifestyle choice shading darkly over time into an ominous, catastrophic veil on the brink. An urgent plea to be lifted, *coming from the veil itself*, in order to bring in the light. A sun-starved house, in other words, that needed to be brought down, leveled, razed.

Büttner himself likely standing beside you in this house, next to you now, whispering *IMMORTAL BELOVED* softly, cupping your ear, carrying the words like a flag, brandishing them, maybe tattooing it across your face, over your heart, dark, diagonal ribbons.

Isn't she lovely? Isn't she made for love?

David Hunt

(September, 2016)