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# Sublime Humility

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*Let us reject the blindness of isolationism, just as we refuse the crown  
of empire. Let us not dominate others with our power—or betray  
them with our indifference. And let us have an American foreign policy  
that reflects American character. The modesty of true strength.  
The humility of real greatness.*

President George W. Bush, campaign speech

*Never let 'em know where you live  
Never let 'em get familiar wit your doe or your kids  
Always stay quiet, humble  
But don't be scared to take it to the knife or the gun in the rumble*  
Ruff Ryder recording artist Jadakiss, "We be like this"

William Hawkins. Born 1895 in rural Kentucky. Moves to Ohio in 1910 to escape the reconstruction that never came. Mops floors, drives a truck, runs a small brothel, and paints. Starts to sell his work around 1930. Paints. Suffers from a stroke in 1989, which leaves him partially paralyzed. Still paints. Dies several months later. 79 years old.

I do not mourn the passing of William Hawkins until the year 2000, when folk-art scholar Lee Kogan shows me a slide of his work. The painting is entitled *The Last Supper #9*, and it is. Bright reds and yellows that swirl in an obscure pattern frame the traditional grouping of the apostles and the triangular focus on Jesus that is the hallmark of last-supper paintings. It is faithful to the traditional pictorial demands of this famous scene, albeit with the vibrant colors and aggressive line quality befitting a painter who was also a janitor, a truck driver, and a pimp. But wait. What's that in front of Jesus? Is that fried chicken? It is. And more. Collard greens. Mashed Potatoes. Rib tips. Judas stares at a peach cobbler.

I don't remember what Da Vinci and the others served Jesus in *their* last supper paintings. But it doesn't matter. I'm transfixed. And now, something changes. What psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan calls an anamorphic shift takes place, and a minor, supplementary detail becomes the anchor point around which the whole obsessively revolves. The last supper is transformed. And it becomes beautiful to me, perhaps for the first time. Not because I love peach cobbler, but because I feel and see the weight of what is depicted, and, at the same time, the lightness of the intervention that distorts the matrix of the formal and historical tradition of the painting, and *still* at the very same time continue to feel that weight. It is actually heavier. Hawkins did not want to make light of the last supper, nor make it somehow more contemporary. He wanted to honor and obey the law of the last supper. Above all, he wanted

to love it, in an excessive way, which is to say in a personal way. And surely you know one loves the other by feeding the other a good meal. Even if you know the other will betray you. Perhaps it is precisely *because* the other will betray you that one has to make the extra effort to make great gravy before the betrayal. Certainly before the redemption.

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Let's start with the obvious: There is no humility without humiliation. In the old and new testaments, humility is an essential characteristic of true piety, of men and women who are right with God. "God humbles men in order to bring them to himself" (Deuteronomy, Chapter 8, Verse 2). And "when men humble themselves before him then they are accepted" (Kings, Chapter 12, Verse 29). The state of grace that frees one from pride and arrogance, the quality of mind that fixates on unworthiness and imperfections for a greater good does not result from the practice of faith or the accumulation of knowledge. It comes from the act of submission. Humility is learned at the end of a whip.

It is important to note here that the state of humility that comes from the grace of humiliation is not a cycle one studiously avoids. This cycle is, in fact, very pleasurable. It also serves a long tradition. There is, of course, that legendary institute for the research and practice of debasement and Eros known as the Catholic Church. No less grand is philosopher Georges Bataille's work, which is a blend of theology, Marxism, and bathroom graffiti. Bataille writes, "Since it is true that one of man's attributes is the derivation of pleasures from the suffering of others, and that erotic pleasure is not only the negation of an agony that takes place at the same instant, but also a lubricious participation in that agony, it is time to choose between the conduct of cowards afraid of their own excesses, and the conduct of those who judge that any given man need not cower like a hunted animal, but instead can see all the moralistic buffoons as so many dogs." And of course we must mention philosopher Jean Paulhan's introduction to the classic story about the erotics of humility and humiliation, Pauline Réage's novel *The Story of O*. Paulhan begins by describing a slave rebellion in Barbados in 1838, in which the slaves, just weeks after they fought and freed themselves, returned to their former master and demanded to be taken back in. Paulhan's essay is entitled "Happiness in Slavery." Pleasurable yes. And hence popular.

Evocations from President Bush and Jada Kiss aside, the production of a state of lowliness of the mind and the perpetual reminder of our fundamental imperfections for the service and consolidation of power is a venerable tradition in America. Can we not make the sincere case that the reason why the United States has the lowest voter-turnout rate of any democratic nation on Earth is that the people of the United States have been thoroughly humbled? Isn't the idea of true humility what motivates pop sensation Britney Spears, in a recent and bizarre interview with CNN teenage conservative Tucker Carlson, to answer, in response to Carlson's question about her opinion on Bush and Iraq, "Honestly, I think we should just trust our president in every decision that he makes and we should just support that." Not only is humility *not* missing in the general discourse, it virtually blankets the whole of our social milieu with its terminal smog of faith and goodwill. Humility, as the pleasure from the passivity that duty demands, calls us from every US department of whatever and every cable news channel as

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insistently as the Islamic call to prayer in the mornings and afternoons that echo throughout cities in Jordan, Syria, and what was once Iraq.

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On the one hand, the cycle of humility and humiliation, a movement that serves to consolidate power and bind us to a contract not unlike a slave to a master. On the other hand, a complete disavowal of this unsavory cycle, risking political and cultural alienation. Is there a third way?

I thought I saw a glimpse of it in Hawkins's painting. No church, Catholic or Protestant, would hang Hawkins's painting in their house of worship and risk questions like, "What is the meaning behind the enormous plate of rib tips next to Jesus?" But Hawkins did not paint the last supper for a laugh. The reverence in the painting betrays an intention beyond parody or critique. Hawkins's painting, rather, resonates with a kind of excessive love that results from a profound embrace of the duty toward the depiction of Christ and the ideas motivating that depiction. It is as if Hawkins imagined he was the only painter with enough experience, knowledge, and love to adequately represent this pivotal scene in Christianity. He cuts out the middle man, as they say, and paints the core of the last supper with what he had and what he knew, in a loving excess above and beyond the law, which is to say, the church, to answer the calling of another master, *another* law. His painting is his answer to this call. And it is dutiful, excessive, sublime, and humble.

The master. The call. The duty. More than the problematics of psychology, education, or their relations to art history, these are for me a truer measure for the "outsiderness" of outsider art. The sordid history of outsider art is a long apologia for misfits and crazies, which is not unlike the sordid history of insider art. But there is a kernel of difference between the two worlds of work. For outsider art, the duty is to the law, not to the new (or more precisely the longing of the new) which is the calling of contemporary art. In other words, the transgressive nature of outsider art is not the pursuit of novel forms and expressions that yield and articulate new pleasures and possibilities. It is, rather, the total embrace of the established forms and traditions that elevate those forms from mere things to "objecthood" or art. The embrace, however, is so tight that it threatens to collapse the forms themselves in a suffocating excess, and in the process, transform the very traditions that elevated those forms in the first place. The weight of the embrace. The honoring of the form. The excessiveness with which they answer the call of a law beyond themselves. Aren't these the hallmarks of the great outsider artists like Henry Darger, Lee Godie, and Howard Finster? And do they not point the way toward a kind of humility that ruptures the Christian cycle of humility and humiliation? A kind of sublime servitude to the law above and beyond the established earthly embodiments of that law, and finally, against the powers that speak for the law, because the true servants of the law know that the law does not speak. It is silent. And it must remain so, humbly, if it is to keep its promise of a more just future to come.

Perhaps this is the crucial difference between true and sublime humility: One serves the present, the other serves the future. Are there other servants of the future besides painters from Kentucky and homeless portraitists wandering the streets of Chicago? Yes, I think. They are in our midst, like

traitors waiting for the right moment to betray the law that speaks only of power and the appalling freedom of the blind. At this very instant, while 130,000 soldiers are serving the will of literally five lonely men in power, seven Americans are in Baghdad serving the goodwill of the American people and the ideals that founded our humble republic. Members of the Chicago-based group Voices in the Wilderness have been serving both the Iraqis and Americans since 1996, openly breaking the unjust US-backed UN sanctions against Iraq, bringing medicines and toys into that country and reminding the rest of us quietly, gently, that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are ideals worth fighting for beyond the fifty states. Members of Voices are now working in the middle of a war zone once known as Baghdad to bring an end to the occupation. Unreasonable? Yes. Crazy? Yes, yes. All guts. No glory. Not even a decent paycheck. Still, they practice their outsider politics and serve us, with us, perhaps even against us.

They are not the only ones. Before Voices in the Wilderness, there were the Quakers and the Mennonites, the liberation theologians, Dorothy Day and the Catholic workers. And way before them the Antinomians, the Levellers, the Ranters, the Diggers, the Ishmaelites, and maybe we can also ask our founding fathers to join this quintessentially American list of humble radicals who bring trouble, honor justice, and serve the law against power.

Perhaps this is why I was so moved when I saw the Black Bloc at the March 2003 anti-war protests in Washington, DC. The Black Bloc is a loose anarchist collective that is universally dismissed as a fringe star in the constellation of contemporary activism. They are young. They dress in all black. They tattoo anarchy symbols all over their ratty backpacks and hoodies. They are blamed for everything from broken windows to injured cops. They're wild and they endanger the legitimacy of the movement, many say.

But they're also the ones who wrap strips of cloth dipped in vinegar around live tear gas canisters thrown at protesters by cops so nobody gets stung by the fumes. I have seen them form phalanxes to crash through barricades so demonstrators could escape the billy clubs and rubber bullets. They serve the movement while remaining excessive to it, and in doing so transform the very nature of that movement.

And you know what they did back in March? They wore these funny hats. I didn't recognize the hats at first, but then someone clued me in: they were the black tricorns worn by George Washington and his rebel crew during the American Revolution. And like Hawkins's painting, the gesture did not feel like parody or critique. It felt, rather, like a kind of honoring. A radical embrace. A mere 220 years later, the Black Bloc dons the same symbol of rebellion that founded our country, fifteen or twenty of them, patriots all, facing down a nervous battalion of riot cops by themselves, trying to expand the perimeter of the protest on the street; for us, with us, against us, beyond us.