



# EXODUS

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Lars Iyer

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## PRAISE FOR *DOGMA*

“Uproarious.”

—*NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

“[*Dogma*] brings back W. and Lars, the most unlikely and absurd literary duo since Samuel Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon... Like *Godot*, this novel is a philosophical rumination, at once serious and playful, on the nature of existence and meaning. While it’s comic, there is at bottom a profoundly tragic sense of the chaos and emptiness of modern life. Despair has rarely been so entertaining.”

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*

“Just when my hilarity over the first book of their misadventures, *Spurious*, had faded to a low chuckle, *Dogma* comes along. Between the two books, there’s almost no point in breathing, much less coming to any strong conclusions about life, the universe, and everything.”

—*LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS*

“Witheringly, gut-bustingly funny.”

—*THE NEW INQUIRY*

“*Dogma*, like its prequel *Spurious*, is provocative in its arguments, scrupulously plain in its style and excoriating in its honesty. Iyer is an author who rejects the parochialism and timidity we too often associate with British novelists in favour of an ugly grapple with the big themes.”

—*THE SPECTATOR (UK)*

“The epithet ‘Beckettian’ is perhaps the most overused in criticism, frequently employed as a proxy for less distinguished designations such as ‘sparse’ or ‘a bit depressing’. But Lars Iyer’s fiction richly deserves this appellation. His playfully spare—and wryly depressing—landscape, incorporating a bickering double act on a hopeless, existential journey, is steeped in the bathos, farce, wordplay and metaphysics of the man John Calder referred to as ‘the last of the great stoics’, its characters accelerating towards a condition of eternal silence, fuelled only by the necessity of speaking out.”

—*THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT*

“The bathos is perfectly pitched, and Lars and W.’s antics are gloriously uproarious.”

—DAVID WINTERS, *THE RUMPUS*

“Expertly crafted throughout ... *Dogma* is also constantly in the process of becoming, which is why—for all the talk of exhaustion and Armageddon—it feels so vital and

remarkably angst-free.... a comic celebration.”

—ANDREW GALLIX, *BOOKSLUT*

“Iyer has distinguished himself as a writer of great comic ability, and I would certainly snap up anything else he might write to see how he deploys this blend of erudition and wit.”

—JACOB SILVERMAN, *THE QUARTERLY CONVERSATION*

“Happily, the insults are Falstafian (as in *Spurious*) ... *Dogma*’s aphoristic style makes the urge to frequently quote from it irresistible.”

—*THE INDIAN EXPRESS*

“Iyer employs the first-person perspective with fantastic flair and originality.... this book is surreal, brainy, plotless, and arguably pointless. It is also brilliantly written and very funny.... I don’t know who else might like this strange book as much as I did, but, as for me, I can’t wait for the third.”

—DREW NELLINS, *THE MILLIONS*

“Like its predecessor, *Dogma* is above all a goldmine of ingeniously abstruse insults, and as a result it is frequently piss-yourself-on-public-transport hilarious.”

—DANNY BYRNE, *READY, STEADY, BOOK*

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## PRAISE FOR *SPURIOUS*

3:AM Novel of the Year 2011

“It’s wonderful. I’d recommend the book for its insults alone.”

—SAM JORDISON, *THE GUARDIAN*

“Fearsomely funny.”

—*THE WASHINGTON POST*

“Viciously funny.”

—*SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE*

“I’m still laughing, and it’s days later.”

—*THE LOS ANGELES TIMES*

“A tiny marvel.... [A] wonderfully monstrous creation.”

—STEVEN POOLE, *THE GUARDIAN*

“This novel has a seductive way of always doubling back on itself, scorching the earth but extracting its own strange brand of laughter from its commitment to despair.”

—*THE BELIEVER*

“Ought to be unreadable, but manages to be intelligent, wildly entertaining, and unexpectedly moving instead.”

—*THE MILLIONS*

“[A] hilarious and eminently quotable debut novel.”

—*MODERN PAINTERS*

“*Spurious* is full of paradox. It’s about everything and nothing. It’s a funny book which uses exclamation marks (I know!). It provokes thought while evading easy understanding. Its characters speak simply about knotty concepts.... [I stopped] on almost every page to smile, think, or sense a cartoon lightbulb of understanding begin to glow above my head before popping out just as I concentrated on it.”

—JOHN SELF, *ASYLUM*

“Evoking literary duos like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, and Othello and Iago, Iyer’s portrait of two insufferable academics fumbling for enlightenment illustrates what the author comically calls the most honorable cruelty: friendship.”

—ERIK MORSE, *BOOKFORUM*

“*Spurious* is an amusing take on intellectual frustration and anomie, its two characters going through the motions in a world where it’s unclear what the right motions are any longer.”

—*THE COMPLETE REVIEW*

“A tragic mein ... undercuts the sheer hilarity of Lars Iyer’s *Spurious*.... To read *Spurious* is to discuss Kafka’s *The Castle* and farts in one exacting sentence—all the while reeking of gin.”

—*NYLON*

“Iyer’s playfully cerebral debut [is] ... piquant, often hilarious, and gutsy.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

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# EXODUS

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Lars Iyer

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# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*First Page*

*About the Author*



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He has things to tell me, W. says when I meet him at Newcastle airport in the morning. Great things! But first he needs a pint. He needs to regroup.

W.'s plane was full of obese children, he says. — 'When did everyone get so fat?' They ran up and down the aisle, unhindered by their girth. But W. got down to some reading despite their bellowing. He underlined passages and wrote in his notebook.

And what was I reading, as I waited for him? When I tell him, he nods and murmurs. — 'Mazzarri, oh I see. Flusser, ah that's far too complex for Lars ...'

I'll have to pay for the beer, W. says in *The Trent*. He no longer carries money, he says. He likes the Queen.

W. wonders why I always make my lips — my great fat lips — into a funnel as I lift my drink. No doubt it's all the better to pour it down, pint after pint: a funnel for the two pints I always neck at the bar before I sit down, and for the dregs of pints that other people leave behind ...

*A legal technicality*, W. says over his second pint. Sacked by his university when they closed down the humanities, and what saved him? *A legal technicality*.

It's not as if he hadn't tried to defend himself, W. says. On the contrary, he'd mounted a heroic defence! At his termination hearing he performed a great oration, his version of Socrates's apology to the jurists of Athens. How he spoke!, W. says. Hours and hours without cease! The committee groaned, they slept. They tried to interrupt, begged to adjourn, but each time W. simply held up his hand. *He wasn't done*.

He showed charts and circulated handouts, W. says. He pushed his *Summa Idiotica* across the table: four hundred pages to make the case against his dismissal. Chapters! An index! A table of contents! Twenty-four appendices! It will stand as his finest work, W. says. But it was all for nothing.

*A legal technicality*, W. says. That's what saved him. Which is ironic, because it was through a *legal technicality* that they tried to get rid of him.

His Union uncovered it. Something about the way the college management had had him marched off campus, when they suspected him of sedition ... Something about interfering with his freedom of movement, with his freedom of *speech* ... W. had a case for *legal action* against the College, his Union said. He could create *bad PR* for the College. Bad press!... At the stroke, W. was unsackable.

*A legal technicality*. It's the *contingency* of his salvation that bothers him, W. says. He was saved, but he might not have been. And if he was saved, it wasn't because of anything he'd done. It wasn't because of *fate*, or *grace*. It wasn't because of his apology. It wasn't because he'd been *chosen* in some way ...

But he's going to act as though he *was* chosen, W. says. As though he *was* saved by grace. *A*

though a divine mission has been allotted to him.

That's what our lecture tour is to be about, W.'s decided. Our great lecture tour of Greece and Britain, our last look at the ruins of the humanities. We are to investigate the *conditions of the sacking!*, W. says. The conditions of the destruction of philosophy at his university — of the destruction of philosophy in Britain — of the destruction of philosophy in the whole world. The end days are upon us, and we must witness them at first hand, W. says. The Pharaoh drowning the children of philosophy. — 'Drink up, fat boy!, there's not much time'.

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Newcastle. My office. The collected works of Kierkegaard, spanning the windowsill. W. always admired them — their sober spines, the different colours against which their titles appear, varying from volume to volume (*Point of View* in charcoal, *The Book on Adler* in bronze, *Fear and Trembling* in a handsome burgundy). And then there's the sheer bulk of them, with my improvised bookmarks sticking out at random. — 'You mean you've actually read something!' W says.

And I have read them. The books look worn, tired. — 'Is that blood?', W. wonders, of the blotches in the margins of *Practice in Christianity*. 'Are those tears?' There are even annotations, W. notices. 'What did you write?', W. asks, turning the book sideways. He can hardly make out a line. *Iration* — what does that mean? *Livity* — what is that?

Why is it that Kierkegaard attracts lunatics?, W. says. He's seen it before, with some of his more desperate students. The half-wild ones, who've come off the streets after years of destitution. The half-mad ones, who want only to lose themselves in some great task of scholarship, but who are made for anything but a great task of scholarship ...

In truth, I know more about Kierkegaard than he does, W. admits. It's my Danish connection. Of course, I'm only *half* Danish, W. says. Half Danish and half Indian, a peculiar combination, he says. He, of course, is Irish on one side of his family and from Jewish stock — *Ostjude* stock — on the other. The wrong background for Kierkegaard, W. says.

But he wants to understand Kierkegaard, W. says. Kierkegaard's become fateful to him. Kierkegaard is the *philosopher of despair*, W. says, and it's *despair* we'll have to think, if we're to confront the closure of philosophy departments in Britain. It's the *philosopher of despair* we'll have to read, if we're to grasp the conditions of that closure, which is to say, *capitalism itself*.

I'm to be his guide in the mountains of Kierkegaard, W. says. His sherpa. I'm to carry his things. What should he bring? His *learning*, W. says. His years of study in the philosophy of religion. He'll instruct me as we climb, W. says. He'll point things out, and when he gets tired, I can give him a piggy-back.

'God, what a racket! How do you do any work?', W. says.

The sound of drilling, high pitched, then lower pitched as they cut through something. The fizz of a lorry's brakes. The clattering of metal poles being thrown onto metal poles. A heavy chugging in the distance. The faraway throbbing of engines ...

They're rebuilding the campus, I tell W. They're putting up new office blocks for the private partners of the university.

He requires silence when he works, W. says. Silence and calm, in his study in the pre-dawn morning, just the pigeons flapping their wings and cooing to annoy him, and Sal asleep in the other room.

*Stand well clear, vehicle reversing*: a warning from a tannoyed male voice. And now warnings overlapping with warnings, as many vehicles reverse: *Stand well clear ... Stand well clear ... Stand well clear ...* And now a high pitched throb, very loud, like a helicopter landing

— ‘Surely a helicopter isn’t landing?’, W. says. ‘A helicopter couldn’t be landing ...’

We walk out through the campus, through the narrow pedestrian routes left to us alongside the building works. W. feels so *channelled*, he says. We’re being *route-marched*, he says, staff and student alike, heads down and in lockstep. — ‘Where are they leading us?’, he says. ‘Where are we going?’

A thick smell — is it tar? They must be pouring tar. They must be making some kind of route for the lorries. A hiss, as of gas escaping. The high beeping of a reversing vehicle. — ‘They’re going to crush us!’, W. says.

We emerge safely into the quadrangle. — ‘They’re going to crush us’, W. repeats calmly. What use is philosophy to the private partners of the university? What use will it be to the new breed of the university, which is busy hatching from the old one?

‘How long do you think we’ll last?’, W. says. ‘How long before philosophy is destroyed altogether?’ Because there’s no room for us in this world, he says. No room for Kierkegaard and for scholars of Kierkegaard ...

‘Are they shredding trees?’, W. asks, as we look back at the building works. Yes, they really are: we can see them cutting off the boughs with chainsaws, and feeding them into huge machines. Leaves fly up over the fence. And the smell: sap. The stuff of life, W. says, being shredded.

It’ll be our turn next, W. says. They’ll cut off our arms and legs and feed us into the huge machines ...

*Stand well clear ... Stand well clear ...*

The Town Moor: escape. We wander through the knee-high grass. What are those birds?, we wonder. What are those flowers? But we have no idea.

The Moor is like the world on the fifth day of creation, we agree — before Adam, before anyone, when everything went unnamed and unredeemed. It needs words, we agree. It needs a poet! Where is the *Rilke of Newcastle* to sing of the Moor?

Above us, a shore of clouds and then blue sky. — ‘That’s a weather front’, W. says. Which way is it travelling? Where is it heading? And where are we heading, we who walk beneath the shore of clouds?

Is the future open to us, or closed? W. can never decide. Are we making progress, or falling behind? W. can never decide that, either.

Alcoholics in the long grass, stretching their limbs and laughing, half-drunk bottles of cider between their ankles. Anyone can walk on the Town Moor, he likes that, W. says. Where the alcoholic can walk, *he* walks, W. says. And where the alcoholic cannot walk — where his way is barred by security guards or policemen — W. will not walk either.

Should we lie down in the long grass and drink ourselves to death?, we wonder. Should we just give up — give up everything — and let death come and find us on the Town Moor? But we consider ourselves to have *work to do* — that’s our idiocy, and our salvation. We actually take ourselves to be *busy* — that’s our imposture and our chance of survival.

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W. remembers how it all began. I came into his care, like a Robin to his Batman: a ward, protégé. How was he to know what would happen?

He taught me table manners as best he could. He tried to teach me politeness — to shake hands, to make chit-chat. He stopped me from continually touching my skin through my shirt and tried to quieten my bellowing.

Friendship involves a lot of nagging, W. says. I had to be nagged! I was like a prisoner released blinking into the light. What had I known of life, before I met him? How had I survived?

I was a scholarly *Kasper Hauser*, W. says, who knew nothing of reading, or note-taking. I could read, that much is true. But only just, only approximately, and with a great deal of pathos, with wild underlinings and illegitimate identifications. — ‘You thought every book you read was about you, didn’t you?’ That’s me!, I would say, pointing to a passage in Hegel. It’s about me!, I would say, pointing to the *Science of Logic*.

And all along, W. was waiting to see if I was the harbourer of some secret wisdom, if my *years of unemployment* had taught me some great and unguessable insight. He took me on into the scholarly world. People were impressed at first, then frightened. Why is he covered in his own spittle?, they asked. Why is he covering us with his spittle?

I made audiences flinch, W. says. Professors would turn white, or leave to vomit. — ‘They couldn’t understand what had just happened’. But W. understood. His heart leaped up.

Hadn’t he always sought an *outsider scholar*? Hadn’t he always dreamt of intellectual movements that took place *outside the university*? Of professors of desperation; of the university of alcoholism?

I came from the outside, and I brought the outside with me, W. says. I came from the everyday and had to stamp the everyday from my boots. — ‘How long had you been unemployed?’ Years, I tell him. Years!: W. can’t imagine it. — ‘And for how long before that had you worked in your warehouse?’ Years again. — ‘Years!’, W. exclaims. Of course, there was also my time with the monks. Ah yes, my ever-surprising *monk years*, W. says.

But there you were, and who had seen anything like it? — ‘You were like a one man hord a Tartar’. There was spittle on my lips and drool in my beard. Had I ever heard of a footnote? Did I know what an appendix was, or what *op. cit.* might mean? Scholarly standards were a irrelevance to me; academic conventions an imposition I could completely ignore. It was quite impressive.

‘Your book! Your first book!’ W.’s still amazed. It was entirely without scholarship, without ideas, W. says. Without the usual concern to explain or to clarify. A book almost entirely lacking in merit. And yet! W. saw something there, although no one else did. He saw it, and not in spite of its many typos and printing errors ... It was there *because* of them, W. says. It was inextricable from them: a kind of massive, looming incompetence. A cloud of stupidity covering the sun, and belonging to it like its shadow.

It was demonic, W. says. It was as forceful as a demiurge. That’s when he became aware

it as a kind of *un*God, as a division of darkness within light, of death within life. How could anything so bad have been written? Who could have defiled the temple of scholarship and revealed it to have been always defiled? He saw it, W. says, even if no one else did. And that was his role to look after me, until the very end.

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Spital Tongues, Newcastle. There it is, W. says, as we walk past the allotments. There it is the terrace where my flat is buried. The dampest row of flats there ever was, W. says. The dampest Tyneside flats, built atop a culvetted river, atop a coal tunnel now used for sewage atop old mine workings, now full of water. The dampest, most rat-infested flats, which should have been demolished a hundred years ago, but have been allowed to survive in the degradation. The last of the slums after all the slums have been cleared ...

And there's *my* flat, the centre of the catastrophe, W. says. *My* flat, a swamp in the shape of a flat, a flat-plague, interred in its pit. *My* flat that the sun doesn't reach, deep underground like a mausoleum to the world's greatest idiot. *My* flat, like a barrow for the greatest of imbeciles ...

'What possessed you to buy an underground flat?' W. says. To be close to the earth, he says was that it? To be close to the toads and the worms, to the creatures of the earth?

Slug trails along the floorboards ... Curled up woodlice in room corners ... — 'The flat being taken back by nature', W. says. He's right. The walls are green. Mushrooms grow from the ceiling. And then there's the damp, of course. The ever-present damp. Is it alive? Is it dead? It's beyond life, and beyond death, W. says.

They should send scientists out to study it, my damp, W. says. They should try to *communicate* with it, like the scientists in *Solaris*. It's more intelligent than us, W. says, he's sure of it. My damp has something momentous to say, something profound. In fact, isn't it speaking now, to those who have ears to hear? Isn't it rumbling in the darkness? I should know, W. says. I live with it. — 'You understand the damp', W. says. Or rather, the damp understands itself in me.

And there are the rats, too, he shouldn't forget them. *My* rats, that's how he thinks of them. *My* rats, my familiars, living under my floorboards. He'd hear them chattering if he pressed his ear to the floor, W. knows that. He'd hear them speaking their obscene language, for a moment that I tell him the rats are all dead.

What next?, W. wonders. What will be the next plague? There are the slugs, of course, but they're scarcely a plague. There are the ants — and the mushrooms. But he believes something more dreadful is gathering itself in my flat, W. says. Something Lovecraftian. Something *cosmic* ...

He's never seen plants growing directly out of concrete, except in my yard, W. says. It's quite extraordinary. It's Japanese knotweed, I tell him. Oh yes, he heard something about it on the radio, W. says. Isn't it taking over Britain? Isn't it choking all our native species one by one? Well, now he knows where it's coming from, W. says. — 'Your yard is the source of all evil'

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My living room. W. takes his place on the Chair of Judgement: 'Bring me gin!' It's going to be a long night. He has a lot to get through, W. says, leaning his chair back against the wall.

My failings, my failures: the usual topic. The failure of my life, of my thought. The failure of my books. Familiar topics. My past failures, my present ones: yes we know about those, W. says. But my *future* failings ... that's what W. wants to talk about tonight.

'Where will you have gone wrong?', he says. 'What will you have done? What crimes have you yet to commit? How will you have managed to have failed anew?'

It's quite a tense, isn't it, the future perfect?, W. says. Who *will I have* disappointed? Him, of course, W. says. Whose hopes *will I have* defiled? His, of course, W. says. His hopes.

Ah, what will I have done to him, W., in the future? What terrors await him? — 'Will you have written another book? Will you have come up with another escape plan?' Ah, but he knows what will have happened. *I* know. We'll have been sacked, and living on the dole.



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He only teaches sports science students, now they've closed the humanities at his college, W. says. They arrive at his seminars ruddy-faced and healthy looking, with towels around the necks. He does his best to improve them, W. says, but it's no good.

They're keen in their way, his students, W. says. They want to do well. But he's having trouble impressing them with the *majesty of thinking*. He's having trouble making them understand the *despair of the world*.

At least there are still a few of his postgraduates around, W. says. At least he still has some allies. One day, they might make a last stand, W. says. They might occupy the gym and trample the cricket pitch. He's been trying to encourage them.

And in the meantime? He roams the corridors that used to echo with the great names. He walks through the empty quadrangle where he used to talk Kant with his colleagues. He sits alone in the refectory, where fellow scholars used to discuss Luhmann and Ellul over the sandwiches, and wanders past the empty offices where he used to have reading groups with other academics, puzzling over Prigogine together, pondering Michel Serres ...

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Of course, they're going to close all humanities courses in British universities, W. says. It's like the '80s over again: protests and strikes, departmental closures and redundancies. It was a terrible time, W. says.

But at least the government recognised philosophy as the enemy in the '80s, W. says. At least they understood the power of philosophy. The humanities are the enemy of capitalism, that's what they understood in the '80s. Philosophy is the eternal adversary of capitalism ...

But now? The government no longer understands the humanities as an enemy, W. says. The government has nothing in particular against philosophy. They do not oppose it on ideological grounds, nor because they suspect it of *subversion*. They are not concerned that philosophy is training *insurgents of thought*.

They're simply going to *marketise education*, W. says. They're simply going to turn the university over to the free market, just as they are turning all sectors of the public service over to the free market. They're going to submit philosophy to the *forces of capitalism* ...

Sometimes, W. is tempted by the idea that philosophy might be *liberated* by its destruction. That, extinguished in the universities, philosophy might soar into its own sky, free of every institutional encumbrance.

Perhaps there will be a new age of thinker-Cynics, former academics, living on the streets and *speaking truth to power*, W. thinks. Perhaps new Socrateses will question empty-headed yuppies in the marketplace ...

But then W. reminds himself that in the future, the streets will be sold off, and all public spaces privatised. That the empty-headed yuppie is only a *function of the system*. That capitalism has no face, and that the financial markets are only a *simmering chaos*.

What kind of Cynic could speak truth to a function? What new Socrates could be a gadfly to *simmering chaos*?

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Reading his redundancy letter, W. felt like the dying Rutger Hauer in *Bladerunner*, he says. 'I've seen things you people wouldn't believe', Hauer said to his murderers. 'Attack ships off the shoulder of Orion. C-beams glittering in the dark near Tannhauser Gate ...' Hasn't W. seen things his sackers wouldn't believe? He's leant on a piano at which Cornelius Castoriadis sang revolutionary songs, at an Essex postgraduate party. He's watched Jean-François Courtine in full flight, writing in Arabic on a Sorbonne blackboard, from right to left. He's heard the legend of Chouchani, from Levinas's own lips, over cups of tea in a Paris apartment ...

Didn't his managers understand what he'd seen?, W. says. Didn't they know that he was part of the legendary generation of *Essex postgraduates*?

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Morning. Leazes Park, Newcastle. This is where I should come when the ping of incoming emails depresses me, W. says. I should rest my gaze on the waterfowl: the black-headed geese, the kingly swans. I should hire a rowing boat to take a turn around the lake. Above all I should walk ...

A man must walk if he is to think, W. says. We have to be receptive to thoughts, open to them; an idea might come to us at any time, and it's only when we relax — when we let the mind stretch out — that it can reach us. How many times has W. walked out alone, hoping that an idea would come looking for him?

W. goes to the tulip garden at Mount Edgumbe when he wants to think, he says. Off he sets in the morning, with his Kafka and a notebook in his man bag, heading up to the Naval dockyards, and then catching the ferry across the Tamar. On the other side, it is only a short walk to the tulip garden, which he approaches through the orangery, then the English garden and then the French garden, he says. But it is the tulip garden which is his destination, W. says, whether it's spring or summer, or, for that matter, autumn or winter; whether or not there is anything in flower.

We must not so much look for ideas, W. says, as let ideas find us. It is not a question of *mental effort*, but of *mental slackening*, he says. Ideas need *time* to emerge — unmeasured time. Ideas despise clocks. They even despise notebooks.

Lately, W. has been deliberately neglecting his notebooks. He's put them aside, he says, and the better for ideas to reach him. W.'s even been neglecting himself! Is it any accident that Solomon Maimon was taken for a vagrant?

Is it because he thought I was a thinker-vagrant that he was drawn to me?, W. wonders. I was certainly scruffy enough, unkempt enough ... But these signs of vagabondage were unaccompanied by signs of thought. The vagrant is not necessarily a thinker: it was a painful lesson, W. says.

Solomon Maimon was dirty!: that's what I always protest to W. when he reprimands me for my personal habits. But Maimon was a genius!, W. cries. A genius driven out of his home city for daring to philosophise. A beggar-genius living on alms, as he wandered for years before being offered a position as a tutor.

Was it in those years that Maimon formulated the most decisive criticisms of Kantian thought that have been made? Was it then, his begging bowl before him, and Kant's three critiques in his knapsack, that ideas came to him, which, in his final years, he would publish in a series of essays?

Only Maimon understands me, Kant said, after reading his unkempt admirer's *Transcendental Philosophy* in manuscript. And when Kant died, it was suspected that among the causes of his death was Maimon's devastating criticism of his work. How could he, Kant, survive an attack by the *ragged philosopher*?

But Maimon never succeeded in penetrating academic circles, nor even the salons of

enlightened Berlin Jews. To them he was of the *Ostjude*, his manners too rough, his jerks and antics too disconcerting, his speech stammering and garbled. And he was a *difficult* man, lacking in manners, brusque and intolerant when he should have been diplomatic.

And he smelt awful, everyone said that. *Maimon stinks! Get him out of here!*: that's what you'd hear in Berlin salons. And out he went, back onto the frozen streets, back outside with the three critiques in his knapsack ...

Maimon was an alcoholic, of course. He drank like a madman, W. says. He drank himself to death even when he found employment as a tutor, even as great essays after great essays poured forth from his pen.

Is that what's going to happen to me? Am I going to produce a great stream of books in my final years, which can't be far off?, W. says. He's offered me support, and now he's waiting. He brought me in from the cold, and now he's sitting by expectantly. But he thinks he's going to be disappointed.

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W. stops to read the plaque about waterfowl. There's usually a melancholy to the urban park, he says, but Leazes Park is different. It's more vibrant, somehow. We look around us: the empty bandstand, the high wall of St James's Park, goths and emo kids drinking cider in the sun ... It all harbours some great clue to life, W.'s strangely certain about that, or maybe it's the effect of the coffee I made for him this morning.

We should bring *our thinkers* here, W. says, the ones we hope will become our leaders of thought. This is the perfect place to help them walk away from their troubles. It's the perfect place to help them *walk their way to thought*.

Haven't we taken many walks alongside one or other of our thinkers? Haven't we been able to loosen our thinkers from the crowd and *take them outside*?

Thinkers have thanked us for nothing less: for giving them freedom from the crowd. Crowds are unbearable to the real thinker, W. says. The thinker always wants to escape. And so we've taken many such journeys — journeys out, away from the others, in company with one or other of our thinkers. Away from the tumult.

We try to calm our thinkers on such walks, that's our main task, W. notes. We try to put them at ease, drawing attention to the pleasant vistas around us, to the blueness of the sky, to the peace of the forest. We make no demands. It's not about us: we've always grasped that.

Occasionally, W. says, I've begun to expound my *caffeine theories*, and he has to put a stop to it. He prods me when our thinker isn't looking. He raises his finger to his lips. And occasionally, W. ventures to introduce some intellectual topic or other before pulling himself back, apologising.

*Let the thinker introduce the topic!*, we've always told ourselves. And sometimes they do. Sometimes they begin to speak, and we respond only to enable them to speak some more, only to let ourselves drift into the central current of their reflections.

What a privilege it is to hear a thinker think! To hear the latest ideas of a thinker extemporised to us as to no one in particular! To be the beach upon which the thinker-sea spreads its waves! To be the shore over which the thought-ocean breaks!

Of course, we can understand little of what we hear. But we expect nothing more. In the end, it's not meant for us! We're overhearers, not interlocutors. We're listeners-in, not conversation-partners. To our credit, we've always understood that. It's why we're popular with thinkers, W. says.

We don't have ideas, and we don't pretend to! In the end, we demand nothing, we ask for nothing. The lightness of our chatter (for we speak when our thinker is silent) is like the murmur of grasshoppers on a summer evening. The to-and-fro of our banter is like the trickling of a young stream: a backdrop, a kind of night against which the star of the idea can burn ever brighter.

In the final judgement, if we were not thinkers — if we never had an idea of our own — then neither did we *hinder* thought. We were not its enemies. *They were not enemies of thought*: isn't that what they might write on our tombstones?

Ah, but there are no thinkers with us today, as we stroll around the lake at Leazes Park

We've been thrown back on ourselves, once again! Thrown back: not upon thought and the development of thought, but upon the babble of non-thought, with no real thinker in sight.

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‘Did you bring some Schnapps?’, W. asks. I brought some Schnapps. — ‘Is it chilled?’ It’s straight from the freezer, I tell him, as the Danes would serve it.

Aalborg akavit, for our picnic. Did Kierkegaard drink Aalborg akavit?, W. wonders. Undoubtedly! Kierkegaard would certainly have drunk it in his early years, his pagan years, W. says. He probably drank himself blind on Aalborg akavit before his return to his faith, just as we must drink ourselves blind on Aalborg akavit, we who are lacking in faith, lacking Kierkegaard’s faith.

And did I bring the herrings? Yes, I brought the herrings, and a disc-shaped packet of crispbread, and some cod roe sandwich paste from the grocery in *Ikea*. And we have some ryebread, too. — ‘Good’, W. says, ‘we’re well prepared’. To *think* like a Dane, you need to eat *and drink* like a Dane, we agree.

We’re *method thinkers*, we’ve decided. A bit like method actors. It’s a question of immersing ourselves in what we study. Of plunging into it. We have to become more Kierkegaardian than Kierkegaard, W. says. More Danish than the melancholy Dane!

It’s like reverse engineering, W. says. We begin with the finished product, i.e., the complete works of Kierkegaard in the Hong and Hong edition, and we work our way back to the mind of the thinker who produced them. But not only to the mind! To the *cultural world* of the thinker; in this case, to the cultural world of nineteenth century Denmark. And to the *physiognomy* of the thinker; in this case, a melancholy disposition, a heaviness of the soul. We must move from the outward to the inward, W. says. Only then, having reached the secret centre of the work, having come to its *engine room* so to speak, might we work our way back out again.

Of course, one mustn’t start reading too soon, W. is adamant about that. One mustn’t simply *devour an oeuvre*, tempting as it may be, the many-coloured spines of Kierkegaard’s works in the Hong and Hong edition, lined up on my windowsill, as inviting as boiled sweets.

One cannot just begin at page one, and then read one’s way to the end, W. says. There must be a kind of pause before reading, a dwelling in the space opened by the *fact* of Kierkegaard, by the *fact* of his writing, by the *fact* that he lived.

*That Kierkegaard wrote*: we should pause before that, mulling it over, W. says. *That Kierkegaard was at all*: we must pause before that, too. And that *we exist at all*, in our stupidity: ah, that’s what’s unbearable, W. says. The fact that, despite our best intentions, we’ll never be able to understand a word of Kierkegaard.

What is the connection between Kierkegaard and capitalism?: that’s our question, W. says. What does Kierkegaard tell us about the *despair* of capitalism? These are the questions that must accompany us on our lecture tour of Britain, of the doomed universities of Great Britain.



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