

God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse is interesting for 95 reasons.

- 1) **Žižek** says God is in pain.
- 2) **Gunjević** argues that St. Augustine can help us elude capitalism.
- 3) **Žižek** suggests that adopting an apocalyptic stance is “the only way to keep a cool head.”
- 4) **Gunjević** tells us how theology is necessary for the revolution

God in Pain

God in Pain

Inversions of Apocalypse

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK and
BORIS GUNJEVIĆ

*Boris Gunjević's chapters translated from the
Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać*



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Contents

**Introduction: For a Theologico-Political
Suspension of the Ethical** *Slavoj Žižek* 7

**Introduction: The Mystagogy of
Revolution** *Boris Gunjević* 7

1. Christianity Against the Sacred *Žižek* 43

2. Babylonian Virtues—Minority Report *Gunjević* 73

3. A Glance into the Archives of Islam *Žižek* 103

**4. Every Book is Like a Fortress—Flesh
Became Word** *Gunjević* 127

5. Only a Suffering God Can Save Us *Žižek* 155

**6. The Thrilling Romance of Radical
Orthodoxy—Spiritual Exercises** *Gunjević* 193

7. The Animal Gaze of the Other *Žižek* 221

**8. Pray and Watch—The Messianic
Subversion** *Gunjević* 241

**References for The Mystagogy of Revolution and
Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8** 271

Introduction

For a
Theologico-
Political
Suspension
of the Ethical
Slavoj Žižek

If, once upon a time, we publicly pretended to believe while privately we were skeptics or even engaged in obscene mocking of our public beliefs, today we publicly tend to profess our skeptical, hedonistic, relaxed attitude while privately we remain haunted by beliefs

Continued on page 27

Introduction

The
Mystagogy
of
Revolution
Boris
Gunjević

The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike

down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who would attempt to poison and destroy My brothers. And you will know My name is the Lord when I lay My vengeance upon thee.

“Ezekiel 25:17”¹

In its first version, this book was put together from unpublished material stemming from a debate on the “The Monstrosity of Christ” between Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank. After *Bog na mukama* (God in Pain) first appeared in Croatian in 2008, friends suggested we publish it in the United States. To that end Žižek offered several new essays and these changes did somewhat alter the book’s concept, though not its substance. The project was conceptualized not as a polemic but as a reflection, a conversation between a philosopher and a theologian, a psychoanalyst and a priest, who, at first glance, have nothing in common.

The place where I stand and whence I write is on a border. This place—between East and West, the Balkan and the Mediterranean, Europe and Eastern Europe—offers a specific perspective on theology about which I have written elsewhere.² From within the ideological construct known as *transition* (nothing more than an opportunity for violence and pillage of biblical proportions under the guise of safeguarding national interests and traditional values), and from a place in which Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Muslims, and Jews have lived for centuries in suppressed conflict, I would like to speak out together with those individuals and movements violently shoved to the margin of discourse, tossed from history to its very periphery where history mocks and taunts any geog-

1 As misquoted by Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) in the Quentin Tarantino film *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

2 Boris Gunjević and Predrag Matvejević, *Tko je tu, odavde je—Povijest milosti* (Whoever is Here, Hails from Here—a History of Charity) (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2010).

raphy. There has been no lack of such heterogeneous movements and individuals in this part of the world, be they heretical Bogumils, Patarenes, Bosnian Christians, Apostolics, followers of John Wycliffe, radical Anabaptist sects, or heteroclitic movements such as the Glagolitic priests, the Hussites, Calvinists, and Lutherans, to which I myself belong. Theirs is either a theology written in their own blood or it is no theology at all. The border on which I stand, in a realm that lies “in between,” has hosted and sheltered over a relatively brief period (and I say this with no small measure of pride) two serious Messianic pretenders who felt they were among their own in this psycho-geographic corner of the world. The first was Fra Dolcino, a Messiah and progenitor of the radical Franciscans known as the Apostolics, who lived in Split and Ulcinj, both cities on the Adriatic Coast. The other, better known, is Sabbatai Zevi, a convert to Islam, a Jewish Messiah, who practiced the Jewish faith in secret until his sudden death among the legendary Ulcinj pirates.

This very border area, this realm “in between,” is a manifestation of the coordinate system I am setting up between two stories. The first concerns Lenin’s speech to the All-Russia Congress of Transport Workers in 1921, the second Boccaccio’s commentary on a dream about Dante. This book came about in a gap within the system of coordinates to be outlined by way of these two apparently unrelated stories.

I

Before he embarked on one of his typical rousing speeches, Lenin addressed the assembled transport workers with a noteworthy comment. While walking through the hall where over 1,000 Congress attendees were gathered, Lenin had spotted a placard displaying the slogan: “The reign of the workers and peasants

will last for ever.” It was no surprise, Lenin remarked, that the sign had been placed “off in a corner,” for the workers who had written it were, generally speaking, still confused about the fundamentals of socialism even three and a half years after the October Revolution. Following the final and decisive battle, he explained, there would no longer be a division between workers and peasants, since all classes would have by then been abolished. As long as there were classes, there would be revolution. Even if the placard had been sidelined and relegated to a corner there was still, so Lenin felt, a clear lack of understanding manifested in the slogan’s in widespread use. There were few workers who understood against what, or whom, they were waging one of the last decisive battles of the revolution. This was precisely what Lenin had come to speak about before the Congress.

So what is remarkable about this introductory digression? First, Lenin failed to take in the more dangerous message on the placard. We can interpret it as a form of theological subversion. That the kingdom of workers and peasants will have no end, that their reign will be eternal, does not spring from the ontology of materialism espousing the eternal nature of matter. No, it is a clear theological formulation as described and invoked by the existence of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, one of the most important Christian documents ever written. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is a rule of Christian faith and practice with which the workers appear to have been familiar, and which would have come down to them from pre-Revolutionary Russia. The message on the placard makes it clear that the workers had indeed taken the Revolution the wrong way. In that, Lenin was right. He did not, however, fully understand what was wrong with their understanding.

Lenin was convinced that the transport workers needed to be told what to think and what to do if they were to serve as an authentic proletariat for the benefit of the Revolution. It was

necessary to place the philosophy of revolution in the service of a proletariat that did not understand it. This can be readily demonstrated by the most tragic moment of the Russian Revolution, the Kronstadt uprising, about which Lenin rants later in the same speech. The crushing of the uprising was nothing more than a party crackdown on those to be eliminated at all costs—those who thought differently from Lenin himself. Here Georg Lukács is surely right when he says that whatever point the theoreticians of revolutionary discourse arrive at using their intellectual powers and *spiritual labor*, the proletariat will already be there thanks to the fact that he is a member of the proletariat—assuming, of course, that he remembers his true class membership and all the consequences arising therefrom. In other words, Lukács is alerting us to the ontological superiority of the proletariat over the intellectuals, who remain at the ontic level of revolution, although one might have the opposite impression. Those workers who participate directly from start to finish in the process of production—with the help of genuine companionship, and living, as Lukács says, in a “spiritual community”—are the only ones able to fulfill the mission of mobilizing revolutionary forces in a process unmarred by intrigue, social climbing, or bureaucracy. They recognize and push aside the opportunists and scoundrels and encourage the waverers.³ In his speech explaining to the transport workers what they ought to be thinking and doing, Lenin does quite the opposite.

Leon Trotsky saw this very early on, in an entirely different context concerning the everyday life of the proletariat. In a study on aspects of everyday life,⁴ Trotsky argues that the worker is

3 Georg Lukács, *Political Writings, 1919–1929: The Question of Parliamentarianism and Other Essays*, trans. Michael McColgan (London: NLB, 1972), 69.

4 Originally published in *Pravda* July 12, 1923. Available at http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/women/life/23_07_12.htm

trapped between vodka, the church, and the cinema. Though he sees all three as narcotics which harm the proletariat, he sets the cinema apart from the other two. Compared to going to a tavern and drinking oneself into a stupor, or attending church where the same drama is perpetually performed out of habit and monotonous ritual, Trotsky prefers the cinema, whose role is entirely different. Encountering the silver screen provides a theatricality of greater grip than that provided by the church, which seduces with a thousand years of stage experience. The cinema clothes itself in a more valuable garb than the vestments of the church and its hierarchy is more varied—it amuses, educates, and makes a powerful impression. Trotsky says that the cinema quashes every desire for religion, that it is the best way to counter tavern and church. He suggests that the cinema should be secured as an instrument for control of the working class. In other words, Trotsky feels seductive spectacle to be essential to revolutionary discourse and practice.

This, in a nutshell, is the argument against Lenin's critique of the placards at the Congress hall. Since he must explain to the transport workers what is expected of them, they are effectively purged from the revolutionary discourse, and, once purged, must be replaced by others, for without workers there can be no revolution or history. Lenin espouses a certain form of pedagogy that invariably fails and abolishes itself chiefly because it does not succeed in instilling any sort of virtue. This is the fundamental error of his whole speech to the Congress of Transport Workers, at a time when the October Revolution was still formally in process.

The Revolution did not succeed because it did not instill virtue, nor was it informed by virtue. The most general thing that can be said is that revolution itself is a form of virtue. Such a statement, however, is all but mystical, and therefore the only thing

remaining for us is to proclaim revolutionary terror a virtue—which is obviously ridiculous. There is no reason at this point for us not to agree with Saint-Just's prophetic insight that he who does not want either revolutionary terror or virtue inevitably turns to corruption—always the consequence of a failure to choose between the first two options.

The only virtue of the revolution is in and of itself. As such it culminates in occasional ecstatic states, in orgies of pure violence that go unpunished. This too often has as its consequence an abandonment of the revolutionary ideal, by which the proletariat disqualifies itself for any number of reasons, such as a growling stomach, mediocre leaders, shenanigans within the party and bureaucracy, poor leadership among homegrown revolutionaries jockeying for position within the party nomenclature. Trotsky ascribes all this to vodka and the church.

It would seem that a proletariat without virtue strips itself of its privileges and disqualifies itself, yet at the same time revolution cannot proceed without a proletariat. Revolutionary discourse presupposes a sacrifice—and if we see this as a virtue in Lenin's revolutionary context then it is always about sacrificing others in the name of a third party—so no wonder “professional revolutionaries” resemble frustrated hedonistic nihilists. Every revolution is doomed to fail if it lacks virtue, if it has no ad hoc participative asceticism which would assume a transcending dimension, no built-in dimension of spiritual exercise, or what Michel Foucault calls “technologies of the self.” Revolution without virtue is necessarily caught between a violent orgiastic lunacy and a bureaucratized statist autism.

Trotsky seems to have been right when he said that man does not live by politics alone, clearly alluding to the story of the temptation of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, as man does not live by bread alone but by every word that issues from the mouth of

God. We are therefore left with only a few options: the tavern, the church, the cinema . . . Or “The reign of the workers and peasants will last for ever.” Clearly Lenin did not comprehend the implications of the transport workers’ placard and hence missed the theological message lurking therein; otherwise, he would not have limited his critique to the question of class. It seems that in criticizing the placard, Lenin was displaying his own ignorance of the elemental religious references informing their perceptions and forming their habitus. In particular, that of the transport workers, who, as modern nomads, convey goods and produce to the state, linking capital, labor, and the market in what is perhaps the most intimate fashion.

This is the first story serving as a sub-text for this book.

II

The second story is Giovanni Boccaccio’s and it concerns Dante Alighieri. It is far more romantic and certainly of greater significance. Taking Dante as his example, Boccaccio means to show how poetry and theology are one and the same, and, moreover, that theology is nothing more than divine poetry. By the same token, in “deconstructing” the *Decameron*, he opines that when Jesus is said to be a lion, lamb, or rock in the Gospels, this is nothing more than a poetic fiction. Furthermore, Boccaccio claims that there are statements by Jesus in the Bible which make no apparent sense if interpreted literally, and which are better understood allegorically. He concludes from this that poetry is theology, and theology poetry. Describing Dante’s life and his *Comedy*, Boccaccio wishes to substantiate his important insight not only by relying on Aristotle but also by using examples from *The Divine Comedy* in relation to the political and social context within which it was written.

The Divine Comedy was penned in exile, a product of Dante's nomadic life. It is therefore no wonder that the *Comedy* itself describes a journey through Hell, Paradise, and Purgatory in the company of unusual fellow travelers who have a special significance for the author. After a schism in the political party of the Whites, of which Dante was a member, and an attack from the papal vassals, referred to as the Blacks, Dante was banished from Florence in 1302, and subsequently condemned in absentia to being burned at the stake. This sentence turned Dante into a poetic and political nomad who would never return to his native city. After roaming through Europe, he reached Ravenna and there he eventually died. Boccaccio says that Dante meant to describe in the vulgate, in rhyme, all works by all people and their merits in history. This was a remarkably ambitious and complex project requiring time and labor, especially as Dante was a man whose footsteps were dogged by fate at every turn, laden with the anxiety of a bitter gall.

The *Comedy* became Dante's life work. When political opponents broke into his home (from which he had fled in haste, leaving everything behind), they found portions of his manuscript in a traveling trunk. These were preserved and handed over to the then most famous of Florentine poets, Dino Frescobaldi. Frescobaldi recognized that before him was a masterpiece, and through acquaintances had the manuscripts sent to Dante's friend the Marquis Morello Malaspina, in whose home Dante had taken shelter. The Marquis had encouraged Dante to persevere, and so he did. Boccaccio tells how Dante's death prevented him from completing his masterpiece: the last thirteen cantos were missing. Dante's friends were dismayed that God had not permitted him to live longer, so that he might complete his extraordinary work. All hope was lost of ever recovering the final cantos.

Dante's sons, Jacopo and Piero, themselves poets, agreed to complete their father's *Comedy*. One night, eight months after Dante's death, Jacopo had an odd dream. The son asked his father whether he had finished the great work and, if so, where those final cantos were hidden. Dante answered that, yes, the work was finished, and he had stowed the manuscript in the wall of his bedroom. Jacopo went off that very night to consult with Piero Giardino, for many years a disciple of Dante's.

Having roused Giardino in the middle of the night, Jacopo could not wait. Both proceeded at once to Dante's house to search the bedroom walls. A tapestry was draped over one wall and behind it was a little door. Opening the door, the two men found the manuscripts tucked away inside, coated in mold and almost destroyed. Having found the final thirteen cantos, they passed them on to Dante's friend Cangrande della Scala, to whom Dante had given his manuscript in stages as he wrote it. According to Boccaccio, Dante dedicated the entire *Comedy* to Cangrande, while each of the three parts is thought to have been dedicated to different individuals. Furthermore, Dante had given Cangrande a hermeneutic key for interpreting the *Comedy* using a simple exegetical formula, first mentioned by Nicholas of Lyre, a contemporary of Dante's, but attributed to Augustine of Dacia. The formula—which, according to Henri de Lubac, can be found in the work *Rotulus pugillaris*, published around 1260⁵—was clearly a medieval interpretation of the Bible, handed down from the Patristics, with roots in Origen's text *Peri Archon*. It reads as follows:

Littera gesta docet,
Quid credas allegoria,

5 Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, Vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 1.

Moralis quad agas
 Quo tendas anagogia.⁶

In a letter to Cangrande, Dante explains that his work is polysemic, in other words that the meaning in the *Comedy* is literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic, and he provides as an example an interpretation of the first verse of Psalm 114. Allegory is extended metaphor and it must meet certain conditions dictated by the theological tradition if it is not to be arbitrary. Literal and allegorical meaning are in a relationship of tension in the *Comedy*. They do not merge, but neither are they separate. This is what makes the Dante of *The Divine Comedy* both an apostle and a prophet.

Dante's fellow travelers on the journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise—Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard—could be deemed ecclesial nomads, with Virgil representing reason, Beatrice divine mercy, and St. Bernard love. Having passed through Hell and Purgatory, each described in pedagogical terms, Dante converses in Paradise with St. Peter on the subject of faith, with St. Jacob on hope, and with St. John on charity. From these conversations it is clear that Dante feels one cannot pass through Hell and Purgatory without the aid of theological virtues such as faith, hope, and charity. To do so, one must become an ecclesial nomad and dwell in virtue. Hence we can say that the *Comedy* is a medieval spiritual allegory depicting the nature of humankind, its purification, and its renewal through the theological virtues.

⁶ Ibid., 271, n. 1. A free translation would read as follows: "The powerful words (*gesta*) of God in history are the foundation of the Christian faith. This faith seeks formulation of its own understanding in a doctrine (*allegoria*). True belief finds moral expression in action" ("what we should be doing"—*moralia*). The meaning of the fourth line, i.e. the purpose and goal of divine redemptive action, gives the answer as "faith that acts through love," and action of this kind leads us onward and upward (*anagogia*).

Dante often plays slyly with the political reality of his day, scrutinizing it closely to arrive at often provocative conclusions. This is evident from the political and spiritual topography within which he situates the participants in his *Comedy*: we might expect to find the heretics in Hell, for instance, but Dante upends things. Pope Nicholas III, as a swindler and Simonist, is consigned to Hell, while the Latin Averroist Siger of Brabant is to be found in Paradise. Siger was a proponent of the so-called theory of “double truth”—the truth of reason and the truth of faith. Strongly influenced by Islam, this had been branded a heresy. Yet there stands Siger in Paradise, alongside St. Bernard who, as a priest, had blessed the Holy Crusades and the massacre of the French Cathars. In Dante’s case, the heresy was more inspirational than influential: its significance was to introduce a political differentiation linked to a prophetic vision of social relations.

Certainly the most important fact about the *The Divine Comedy* is that Dante thought of it as instructional and emancipatory. His master work was to be practical and contemplative, as every metaphysical speculation must come down to ethical action, its ultimate objective being an uplifting of the individual towards God and unity with a blessed vision of the Trinity. The way Dante speaks of the vision of God in *The Divine Comedy* is worth remarking on. It might escape the notice of us ultramodern readers that there is no God to be seen in Dante’s Paradise. This is the apotheosis of his poetic theology. There is no God in Paradise because Paradise is in God, and this is why the vision of the Trinity matters to Dante. He intended to articulate a model for ethical transcendence by presenting and evaluating the place of every person in eternity. His ambitious project is of great theological import for us today. This is the second story serving as a sub-text for this book.

III

At this point, it would be apposite to explain why, in introducing this collaborative volume, I chose not to use stories that were closer to us in time and affinity. I could have taken two less “mythological” stories that would have been more “authentic.” However, all later interpretations of the stories, no matter how scholarly and professional, are rooted in the initial “myth.” If we truly want to understand we must return to the origins, to see what sort of connection these stories have to us today. In other words, between Lenin’s speech to the transport workers and Boccaccio’s commentary on a dream, there is a coordinate system reaching through time and space within which I intend to situate my own theological vision. The cartography of that vision begins after the polemic between Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank published in *The Monstrosity of Christ*.⁷ In my opinion that polemic is not yet done, though things seem to have reached a logical conclusion. We can read their debate in two equally plausible and compatible ways:

The first reading is possible with the help of Martin Luther’s key—the distinction between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory. In this case, Žižek would be a materialistic theologian of the cross (after Luther himself, Jakob Böhme, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Jacques Lacan) while Milbank might just as well be a Thomistic theologian of glory (after Augustine, theurgical Neo-Platonism, Nicholas of Cusa, Félix Ravaisson, Sergius Bulgakov, G. K. Chesterton, Henri de Lubac, Olivier-Thomas Venard). Such a claim stems from Žižek’s and Milbank’s insistence on the importance of Meister Eckhart’s (proto-)“modern” work, which they both see as crucial and influential, though they interpret it in diametrically opposing ways. Milbank goes so far as to claim

⁷ See Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009).

that Eckhart has laid the groundwork for a path to an “alternate modernism,” in contrast to the path which was actually taken, in the wake of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.

The second reading of the debate draws on Dante’s distinction between tragedy and comedy: Tragedy begins softly, imperceptibly, and almost “at random,” like a marvelous promise; yet it ends tragically, in violence. Comedy, conversely, begins with a cruel reality and yet ends up happier and more joyous than it began. This proposed reading involves a juxtaposition of revolutionary and theological discourse, revolution and theology. A revolution begins “softly, imperceptibly,” and ends in violent tragedy, while theology, like comedy, begins with a cruel act of incarnation but ends happily in the New Jerusalem. This reading, however, is not as simple as it might seem; indeed there is much in it to criticize.

The tragic aspect of theology consists in its countless attempts to interpret the violence that runs through the New Testament, where even that joyous New-Jerusalem ending is preceded by the cosmic terror of retribution from the Anti-Christ and his legions of angels. In revolution the situation is reversed: it begins with revolutionary fervor and a joyous vision of universal transformation. Revolution is at first and in the middle borne by this enthusiasm, right up to the very end—which is invariably tragic.

My intention in the rest of this introduction is to describe my own theological trajectory using a “poetics of close observation and description” of what is “in between.” I wish to situate this by probing what is “in between”—in between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory, tragedy and comedy, revolution and theology—within the paradox of a relationship of tension, for tension is considered to be a primordial theological category, and the word “tension” suggests

an intensity I hold to be crucial in my own theological inquiries. It might seem that my intention in juxtaposing Lenin and Dante is somehow to mock both the revolutionary and the theological discourse. But nothing could be further from the truth. It is in fact Žižek's own treatment of Lenin's revolutionary texts (and of Stalin's terror), and the comparison Graham Ward has drawn between John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* and *The Divine Comedy*, that make possible this paradoxical juxtaposition.⁸ I wish to show that the Žižek-Milbank debate is not over because, as is true of all polemics, it ends up reducing the fundamental arguments and conclusions involved. The book must be finished but the debate cannot be closed. This becomes clearer in light of those parts of their correspondence which were not included in the book. These are fragments which demonstrate how a debate can suddenly shoot off on a different tangent. It is precisely these unpublished passages and discarded fragments—which may at first glance seem pointless—that I am interested in. After a certain amount of back-and-forth in the form of replies to the initial theses set out in the text, Milbank says the following:⁹

My reply to the reply to the reply would be:

“But I don't wager on a punitive God. I wager on St. Paul or Origen or Gregory of Nyssa's God who

8 When speaking of *Theology and Social Theory*, Graham Ward sees it as an epic and heroic work, insinuating that Milbank's book is a postmodern version of *The Divine Comedy*. See Graham Ward, “John Milbank's Divina Commedia,” *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992): 311–18.

9 Those replies not included in the book were published later in separate articles. See John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, and Creston Davies, *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010); John Milbank, “Without Heaven There is Only Hell on Earth: 15 Verdicts on Žižek's Response,” *Political Theology* 11:1 (2010); Slavoj Žižek, “The Atheist Wager,” *Political Theology* 11:1 (2010).

will finally redeem all. Without this belief one cannot hope that one day being will be shown to coincide with the good. This would indeed leave one with only 'morality'—only the despairing gesture of trying to hold back death for a time. Only an endless wrangle about how to portion out scarce and damaged resources. By contrast, only Christianity allows one to hope and therefore to work for the infinite fulfillment of all in harmony with all."

Žižek once more remarks in closing that their arguing has turned into a succession of monologues:

Time to conclude.

When, at the beginning of his reply to my reply, Milbank claims that, in my previous reply, I merely reiterated my main points, without properly engaging with his specific arguments, my reaction is that this, exactly, is what he is doing in his second reply—a clear sign that our exchange exhausted its potentials. So, since we are both reduced to reiterating our positions, the only appropriate way for me is to conclude the exchange.¹⁰

These are portions I feel to be important, even though they may seem to be useless, common knowledge which is always best avoided, the common knowledge should be rearranged and the material from which it is constructed should be reassembled. This reminds me of how one might feel about being asked to write a book about Venice, when there are at least

¹⁰ These two exchanges appear in an e-mail from John Milbank to the author, September 16, 2008.

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