

OPEN

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## The Gift of Death

*Abstract: Here we begin to delve into the true heart of the art of acting. If theater is no longer understood as a theater of representation, then what takes place on stage is a transformation at play with truth. Heiner Müller called it a symbolic death, the most central event of the theater. Its most fundamental and most intimate impact stems from the fear, shared by audience and actors, of the caesura of death and the horror of the definitive loss of ourselves as subjects.*

*But does the fascination of theater not draw from the pleasure of metamorphosis, from gain, surplus, and the joy of the singular rightness of conditions? This interpretation ends in an ethical expectation of theater in which the stage becomes a site that reminds us what we, qua our existence, might have become. Such a foolish fable of felicitousness seems anachronistic. But the time of theater is outside of our time, it is a time of promises.*

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## Tu es mort

*Death is none of our business, because as long as we are, death is not and when death is, we are no longer, as Epicurus noted more than two thousand years ago.*

*But your death is my business. You are dead. Now I will never ever see you again. This is the only reason I know what dying, what death, means. Only your death reveals to me the radical nature of death. Your death renders me inconsolable. Tears a hole in my life.*

*The first death is the death of the other, not our own. It is the only reason we know that we are mortal.*

*Our hearts torn open, time torn open. A fissure, a gap and abyss into which past, present, and future disappear. The time of death sucks them in, obliterated, nothing left but emptiness. When it opens its eyelids without lashes, there are no eyes behind them, only black ugly caves.*

*The clock face of eternity on which no number is written and which is its own hand. A horrible black finger pointing to an empty dial – for the dead want to see their time on it, Jean Paul says.*

*Ananke turns kairos into its opposite.*

*No longer a propitious moment, the fate of necessity, which also brings death, has irrevocably, irreversibly taken you from me and with you pulled everything into absence. “Sum in puncto desperationis,” wrote Friedrich Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck in 1881. Desperation as standstill, a full stop.*

## Theater as a symbolic death

The time has come, in this research on the actor, to return to the beginning: The case of drama student Hannah J. in auditorium X.

The search engine that began combing for answers to what had happened has meanwhile filled many pages with ideas. It crashed and was rebooted many times, and many trial runs were carried out. Its hits were all over the place: aspects, splinters, fragmentary observations, impressions, theses, speculations, and descriptions of phenomena. Whether directly or indirectly, they also always pointed back to Hannah J.

Paradoxically, contrary to all “reasonable” expectations, Hannah J. broke into tears and stopped playing just at the moment when her acting became creative. She refused to act any further and was overcome with a sudden aversion to becoming an actor, although it had been her most coveted desire.

Her audience tried to understand why. Why did she stop? What blow was she dealt? What trap door opened? Was Hannah J. crying for herself? Was she rebelling against the event of a symbolic death? Did she stare directly into the contemporary mask of Dionysus,<sup>1</sup> which masks nothingness, the caesura of death inherent to the heart of all creativity? Did the shock of the absence behind the mask, the fear of being abandoned and left to the bottomless stage of our being-in-the-world threaten her subliminal image of the world and of the sovereignty of the subject? Did the act of engaging acting attack this common sense and transform it into “holy earnest,”<sup>2</sup> so that instead of joy the young actor was overcome by the deathly fear identified by Heiner Müller? The siren song of a monster in the actor’s art of metamorphosis. But it was not a “harmless”

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1 Walter Otto, “The Symbol of the Mask,” in *Dionysus Myth and Cult*, 86–92.

2 Huizinga, 23.

*A closed metal top, a second wooden cover, the trace of your face gone, no longer to be gazed upon. The thought of the cold storage box into which the dead are pushed in our culture makes my desperation even greater. Everything has been obliterated with you, fallen into a coma. Time does not pass or last, kairos and chronos have both been paralyzed, destroyed. Hermetically sealed, being is only misery. Everything drags, listless, lustless, apathetic, hopeless, and pointless, and fear has a field day. It is a diffuse insubordinate fear that gets in everywhere. Fear's shadow is on the walls, the ceiling, the air, in each and every breath. The present is only a never again. The future is only a never again. The past is only the pain of never again. Time is only lack. Holding on in vain. Everything is unapproachable, inaccessible, remote. Life is swallowed up by its absence. You are no longer here destroys everything else.*

*The extreme absence conjured by your death eggs fear on, day by day, night by night, uncanny and all powerful. Especially mornings. Fear lies heavy as a coffin lid on my breast. It is insistent that one day there will really be no more mornings, no future, no place to hide. One day, everything will truly be destroyed forever by death and, the unwelcome appendix, we can fail completely, our end can be nothing more than a dead end. We might not notice until it is too late, while dying, expiring under an indifferent sky. Cursed, abandoned, lost, and finally forgotten, because there is no time in which there could have been a happy ending. False deceptive words, the useless comfort of a childish desire.*

transformation such as we usually understand it, one that takes place in the narrative, but a central element in the event of the play, from which the familiar ego is not sure it will emerge unscathed. Cunning Odysseus had his companions, their ears closed with wax, tie him to the mast so that he could enjoy the siren's song without plunging to his death. Did Hannah J. quickly close all her senses because, cut loose, she felt the unfamiliar, frightening pull of the exposure of her very own existence? Was her stubborn self-censure of theater an emergency brake so that she would not be tempted to wander any further into dangerous territory? "The psyche's extended: knows nothing about it," Freud wrote on August 22, 1938, in a note published posthumously, a note the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy called Freud's "most fascinating and ... perhaps most decisive statement."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps something similar happened in auditorium X. Perhaps it was the event of suddenly experiencing the strange extension of the psyche beyond her own skin – but how far? where to? Or perhaps the intimidating experience of, so to speak, losing herself in play, which blew apart the fictional aspect of theater. Yes, maybe that is how it was. There is no other reason to break into tears at the moment when everything falls into place, no other reason to swear off theater. This irritation obviously got under her skin; it hurt her, it was emotional, full of pathos, a real acid test.

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3 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, 21.

*Where is Paul Celan's counterword, the word that cuts the string, the step taken toward freedom? Sure, in art, anything can happen in art. But what about in real life? Without a stage, without a theater, without a prompter, without a text committed to memory? There is no word there, no counterword. There is only emptiness of heart and mind, only complete absence. Meaninglessness, greedy as cancer, begins to spread and takes over strength, joy, happiness, and perception in general until an eyeless, mouthless mask has grown over one's own face.*

*Without a gaze, being loses its orientation, runs around in circles. Round and round. A circle that continually runs into the same dead end of powerlessness, a circle of depression, of fear, a vicious circle – and the devil laughs up his sleeve.*

Which specter is haunting here?

“Where wilt thou lead me? speak, I’ll go no further.”<sup>4</sup>

*back at the same place fallen into the same trap where language fails where grammar dissolves and the sudden shock remains a fear that will not be shaken immune to reason ethereal reflections cut off from torn away from myself forced into absence although we actors are all about presence can always only be present the principle of my individuation has been violated gambled away disclosed exposed*

*absence in simultaneous presence destabilizing paradox how can i find words for a vacuum at the center of my being words that unburden explain enlighten when they have moved to the sphere of the unsayable outside exscribing as i read in corpus without understanding what it means jesus mary and joseph my grandfather would now bellow this confounded hole the actor disappears into without disappearing this pitfall of play this almost point of no return what kind of game is that you can play with-out me count me out*

## Point of no return

At the point of no return there is no stopping, and free will is lamed. The turn is a tear in time, a caesura where something happens that cannot be undone. Something comes to an end. A border is crossed, a blow dealt – and the result is a transformation, either of one’s outer form or of one’s relation to oneself. Either way, afterward nothing is as it was before. Many a text discusses this phenomenon.

For example, the Joan of Arc monologue that Hannah J. was struggling with in auditorium X mentions two turning points before which Joan stood helplessly. In the first, the shepherdess is called by God to liberate France, and in the second she is in battle with the English General Lionel. That time the turn is caused by looking into the eyes of a man. It is a gaze of love that enters her and makes it impossible for her to kill the enemy as she has killed others before him, although she has won. “My heart is changed with many alterings,” she cries, bemoaning this gaze, which also silences the voice of God within her.<sup>5</sup>

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4 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare*, 804; on this see also Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 21.

5 Friedrich Schiller, *The Maid of Orleans*, 86.

A scandalous contradiction is raised here.

In the era of Weimar classicism, Friedrich Schiller found a “moral” answer to Joan’s point of no return. On the one hand, there is her death in battle. How could she, guiltlessly guilty, go on living? Joan has to die; she must forfeit her life in battle. On the other hand, this death is made meaningful by her posthumous elevation to sainthood.

On the battlefield of the stage, the actor is exposed to a similarly offensive contradiction and is paradoxically simultaneously guilty and innocent because he is caught between power and powerlessness, or passivity and action, or being with and with-out himself. When this differentiation occurs in him, his acting loses its naiveté or, to borrow from Johan Huizinga, it loses its profane, everyday character. This realization does not take place on an intellectual level. Rather, it stems from the corporeal experience of being simultaneously appropriated and expropriated while acting. All at once the actor *knows* that for the rest of his life he must abandon himself to this process. One might call the effects *differentiations* or *wounds* that tear open one’s very existence, the fragility of the unforeseeable.<sup>6</sup> Its secret. Or you could call these effects the absent, the elusive, that which remains unsolved. The ego-alien, the dark Other of our selves, that which the ego is unable to tame and can never be predicted, no matter what the event.

This can, of course, disturb someone deeply, as it must have Hannah J., and suddenly and completely change the feelings they used to have about theater. Suddenly acting is no longer non-committal, and the play loses the protective veneer of mere representation behind which the actor, consciously or unconsciously, can hide, behind which he can, in the end, keep Heiner Müller’s idea about theatrical transformation at bay.

But which law dictates that fear is the only ruler of transformation? Why should fear alone join actor and audience so powerfully – only the threat of future loss and no gain?

Against Müller, we can insist that joy and wanton desire are also able to burst upon actor and audience and exert the same magical draw. The ancient emblem of the theater is twofold. The mourning of tragedy is linked to the pleasure of comedy. At the end the beginning is waiting.

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6 Compare Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*.



Even in its fictive preemption. Doesn't anticipation pervade all of reality, anticipation of possibilities that preempt themselves?

But when the ability to differentiate has been awakened, what might the liberating blow look like that catapults us into joy and opens the possibility that the jumping jack need not remain a marionette tangled in its strings, lying knotted and lifeless in the corner? Does abandoning our self hold a promise that we can read in the example of the actor?

The meanings of abandon<sup>7</sup> range from renounce, desert, disown, jilt, reject to abandoning ship, leaving to die. With its connotations of being left, discarded, washing hands of, it is a threatening word. But it has another meaning – uninhibited surrender – which adds a more positive twist.

Etymologically, abandon stems from the French *à bandon*, at the discretion of, a legal term used in the 3rd century when forests were opened for anyone to freely cut down wood – hence the sense of giving up control, letting go, a gift.

These dual meanings follow us from the celebratory fearful moment of our birth through life and finally death. Thus seen, the need to abandon oneself – the “symbolic death” in the transformation of theater – is not necessarily synonymous with desertion and destruction.

We could flip the whole thing around!

## Felicity – a salto mortale

The “true world” finally became a fable, it was said.

So why shouldn't we spin fables about more than fear and death, with its modern insistence on the precedence of total impermanence. Doesn't the modern panacea of economic growth also speculate shamelessly, amidst the finite and despite all finality, even if it goes against all reason?<sup>8</sup> Besides, this is theater after all, where there is always conflict about who gets which role, especially the lead. So why should we leave the stage to the Grim Reaper in the role of the last remaining god?

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7 *Preisgeben* in the German original, a word that stems from *preisen*, to praise and *geben*, to give – trans.

8 Fred Luks, *Endlich im Endlichen. Oder: Warum die Rettung der Welt Ironie und Großzügigkeit erfordert* (Marburg: Metropolis, 2010).

“From hour to hour, we ripe and ripe, / And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot, / And thereby hangs a tale,”<sup>9</sup> as the Shakespearean fool Touchstone says.

Certainly.

But which tale? The tale of the last legitimate European self-certitude about puppets on a string that does not break because it is programmed to move inexorably toward death, while we (stinginess is sexy! as a popular German ad campaign proclaims) try to console ourselves with golden coins? Why shouldn't we spin fables that go beyond this last myth of European modernity,<sup>10</sup> without automatically being stigmatized as trying to take refuge in a backward world? Why shouldn't we, without automatically choosing the opposite path, hear the crow of the rooster not only as the call to nihilism but *also* as a call to a future beautiful morning?

Would it set off too many idiosyncrasies?

We are so forgiving of fools of the theater. Why not give them some credit?

But everyone is on credit. There is nothing left to give. We only believe in the dark fatality of our being. Even if we try to repress, ignore, or be indifferent to the sirens' song, it has its effect, “and wide around lie human bones that whiten all the ground.”<sup>11</sup>

What have we humans done in some black chasm of the black sky that we were given the punishment of living?

As if in retribution for some unknown disgraceful deed, we are torn from a shapeless, painless, nameless peace and herded into kicking, gnawing bodies that, driven by their hunger and their thirst, by their hate, their fear or just their complete stupidity, will still end up mutilated on some battlefield of life. And even if we succeed in becoming old and frail [ ... ] in the end we finally also perish at the decree of some merciless creator – from our hunger for life, our destructive urges or just the simple progression of time.<sup>12</sup>

9 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II Scene VII, 223.

10 Hans-Dieter Bahr, *Den Tod denken* (Munich: Fink, 2002), 10.

11 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Alexander Pope (South Bend: Ex Fontibus, 2012), 206.

12 Christoph Ransmayr, *Odysseus, Verbrecher. Schauspiel einer Heimkehr* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2010), 11.

Thus begins Christoph Ransmayr's version of the return of Odysseus after the destruction of Troy. *Odysseus Verbrecher* (outlaw) is now the name of the hero of Homer's epic poem, one of the milestones of the beginnings of Western culture. It is a grand nihilistic excess similar to Jean Paul's *Speech of the Dead Christ*, with the difference that this *Schauspiel einer Heimkehr* (Homecoming drama) reads like a tragic, late modern era echo of the sirens' song. There is no longer a nightmare vision of the future. The 20th century has drowned itself in blood, and the tragedies of annihilation continue – wearing many masks – with no end in sight.

Slaughter and murder is a caesura with no homecoming. Odysseus the “destroyer of cities” returns, but he has become another, and the long period of waiting has also irreversibly changed Penelope. No reparations can be made. It is no longer possible for them to embrace. Their past love, their old happiness has rotted away, lost and betrayed. Neither has their son Telemachus been spared. Traumatically, he is pulled into a new cycle of killing and dying.

Homo sacer, accursed man, who knows no refuge from death.<sup>13</sup> Homo sacer, holy man, holder of the *lumen naturale*, the light of knowledge. Ill-fated equivocality that allows him to understand the beauty and horror that permeate the world.

“It is ten o'clock:  
Thus we may see,' quoth he, 'how the world wags:  
'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,  
And after one hour more 'twill be eleven;  
And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,  
And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot;  
And thereby hangs a tale.' When I did hear  
The motley fool thus moral on the time,  
My lungs began to crow like chanticleer.  
That fools should be so deep-contemplative,  
And I did laugh sans intermission  
An hour by his dial.”<sup>14</sup>

13 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

14 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II Scene VII, 223.

If in *As You Like It* William Shakespeare's melancholy figure Jacques is right – who cannot stop laughing about Touchstone the fool's reasoning – then the stages of this world and the theater performed upon them are nothing but a space on which we can die of laughter upon hearing the profound memento mori spoken by motley fools.

And crossing this stage of the world, following Müller's gaze *Under the Sign of Saturn*,<sup>15</sup> the theater is only a space where we remember ourselves as someone who might die, joined only in our fear of death, the final horizon.

Why not? Who says it is not so?

Fortune. Felicity.

The fabulous occurrence of a rapturous performance.

Another reason to die laughing?

As you like it.

The incorrigibility of fortune is controversial. As it should be. In the flitting comedy of errors that is the fable of truth, each must find out for themselves where they belong. No one is spared from slipping up.

When a performance really hits the mark, a sort of side jump occurs, an unexpected turn, a peripeteia that no reasoning can touch. If someone says it was only a chimera, you will feel stupid, ashamed, liable to stutter like a fool. There is no conclusive explanation for felicity, only attempts to describe the event and its effects. Reflection cannot define it definitively; it is against the reign of ideas that assumes all concepts can be delimited and fixed in all their interrelations. Delineation and adjudication reach their limits at felicity. It opens a flowing current, a soma current, an overflow that robs both the occidental white narcotic<sup>16</sup> of objective science as well as the sirens' song of its power. Interconnections abound and become fruitful. Lush, voluptuous, oriental. They are extravagant and generous. Their coupling, the coupling of the muses, a constant *copula*, is continuously creative. The gap created by the leap to the side, the escapade, by breaking the rules and norms, lets something in which had previously been barred. The blind spot becomes a pore that sees without seeing and opens itself, replicates itself playfully, again and again. A new pore, another space for something new is created. There is no end.

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15 Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1980).

16 Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology. Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" in *New Literary History*, vol. 6(1), (August 1974): 5–74.

Perhaps we could say that the foundation of felicity is porosity. The fruitful, fertile, fecund openings with which felicity shares its root, felix. It is sited outside of our ability to reason logically, outside the logical concept of understanding and within the realm of the metaphor, the trope, the fable, and the disposition that does not deny but welcomes knowledge.

In the pathos of a propitious performance we understand that although death ends life, it does not undo birth; that the impossible is possible and yet the possible still impossible; that everything is transformed even though nothing has changed. Its potency suspends the irrevocability of the past. The structure of polar opposites is suspended in favor of another, altered state in which attentiveness and generosity reign and protect against the poison of resentment, even overriding its reactionary system – at least for a moment. The ear behind your ear opens, the eye behind your eye, with passion in reason and reason in passion, your heart in your mouth and your mouth in your heart. They all become transparent to each other, wink at each other conspiratorially. They are players in the same game the aim of which is not to attain the highest number, but to have everything be as right as it can be. In accomplishment and in joy the taste of all the senses tickles the palate. The smell of rot and decay has vanished, and the apple we bite into is not poisoned.

## Our friend Touchstone

Basking in the forest sun, Shakespeare's fool Touchstone argues with Lady Fortune about her moodiness. And even when he speaks foolishly, he does so wisely, but in vain. There is no sense in logical argumentation with that lady. You need to give that up, he says. Therefore he may not be called a fool until destiny, the lucky break, happiness has fallen upon him from heaven, when Lady Fortune's wheel has turned to his advantage and her cornucopia is poured upon him. "Call me not fool till heaven hath sent me fortune."<sup>17</sup> An ironic play with words, a keen insight, a silly aberration? How should we understand what Touchstone says?

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17 Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7, 223.

Perhaps his contradictory back and forth – “a motley fool, a miserable world”<sup>18</sup> – is meant to put the riddle of Fortuna, of luck, to the touchstone and determine its measure of gold.

Thus perhaps his name.

In Shakespeare’s time, a touchstone was originally used to determine the measure of gold in a stone. A sample was rubbed on a touchstone until it left a visible line, the color of which was compared to pure gold. Touchstone’s name can, of course, be understood metaphorically. The fool rubs his thoughts against the riddle of fortune to determine not whether it is gold, the possession of which is said to make the world go around, but another glittering treasure. Touchstone is looking for the gleam, the shine, the aura of fortune, the person luck has shone upon and who, full of joy, himself shines.

The art of the actor can be an example of this. When acting is fortunate and talent and accomplishment are kissed by the muses in a propitious moment, the actors emanate a particular gleam, a shining, a certain aura. This aura is more than their mimetic art and cannot be reduced to an aesthetic grammar. It should not be confused with the aura of a fascinating or charismatic person. The luminescence of felicity is not the potentiation of the subject who captivates through the power of his talent and his personality alone. Rather, it is a sign of the limits of the power of the subject, its crisis. The coercive experience of an Other takes place within the aura of fortune or felicitous play; it provokes a transformation of the ego or, in Müller’s words, its “symbolic death.” The auratic element of on-stage transformation marks, if you will, the much talked-about death of the subject, which is suddenly no longer the source and foundation of knowledge, freedom, speech, and history, and paradoxically at the same time regains itself as *subiectum*. Its aura is the numinosity of the “unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”<sup>19</sup>

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18 Ibid.

19 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, trans. by Michel W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 23.

What to do? In the middle of playing in fortune's favor, to be – *quel malheur!* – unexpectedly waylaid by fear like Hannah J. and then recoil? How could she suddenly do what she could not do before and what price did she pay?

Or – *quel bonheur!* – to be waylaid by joy and give yourself over to the passion of this turn, this moment of *kairos*, a *salto mortale* that went well, which in this risky game can mean returning to itself? This does not mean giving up your freedom but willingly surrendering to a look of love in the eyes of being. An affirmative, consensual look. A look of resignation, giving oneself up without fear because a look of love is always a yes and not a no. Because it is both pledge and promise of trust and generosity rather than of lack and loss.

Theater champions a great diversity of concepts, needs, desires, ideas, and paradigms.

But if an actor is electrified by the autopoietic power of theatrical art, then the art of the actor is not only the virtuosity of his ability. Neither is it the representation of factual reality, that is to say, the reproduction of what is already there and known, no matter how much mimetic pleasure this can give both actor and audience. Neither does it have to do solely with political or ideological content. The electrostatic<sup>20</sup> thread of Ariadne in the art of acting, no matter what the aesthetic form, is in carrying the monstrosity of our existence, the corporeal creative path *from the self to the self*. Inward and outward, the trapdoor of an always unique event. Extreme exposition leads to extreme intimacy, and extreme intimacy leads to extreme exposition – always in the state of being with each other. The uncanny transforms enthusiastically into astonishment about how we can transcend our own possibilities, go beyond our own subjectivity, while still only showing this with ourselves and through ourselves. *With-out me* transforms from horror to joy about the never-ending difference in that which is spoken and promised together, that which we, here and now, might once become. Theater as a chamber of the sublime could be the common space of re-membering the potentiality of human existence.

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20 “*Elektra* means ‘the shining sun.’ A gold-silver alloy is known as *electrum*, which in turn comes from amber, *electron* the root of our *electricity*.” Elisabeth von Samsonow, *Anti-Elektra* (Zurich: diaphanes, 2007), 9.

The event of the performative in the acting process is made up, as we have seen, of the conscious absorption of a critical reworking of one's own archive, the historical and the personal archive. The responsibility and the ethos of the actor must be to embrace this pathos, this passion, this *passio* – to be its physiological witness. He owes this to his talent, to promise himself to that which is existential within repetition, as a category of the future, a possibility that is always becoming, not as a promise of a tomorrow that never comes, but of one that can, and does indeed, arrive in the moment of a felicitous, providential performance.

Against the spirit of our epoch, it might be time to reinstate beauty, felicity, and fortune in the canon of art.

*L'avenir du bonheur! L'avenir de la beauté!*



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