English Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/nest20

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To cite this article: João Paulo Guimarães & Elina Siltanen (2023) American Evil: Steven Zultanski's Bribery, Liberal Guilt and the Quest for Authenticity, English Studies, 104:2, 264-282, DOI: 10.1080/0013838X.2023.2170591

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2023.2170591

Published online: 10 Feb 2023.

ENGLISH STUDIES
2023, VOL. 104, NO. 2, 264–282
https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2023.2170591

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

American Evil: Steven Zultanski's Bribery, Liberal Guilt and the Quest for Authenticity

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses American poet Steven Zultanski's 2014 *Bribery*, a book of post-conceptual poetry which unfolds as a quest for authenticity, the aim being to address the sense of impasse and guilt that, according to the book's speaker, are prevalent among the denizens of America, depicted throughout as the nexus of evil. For *Bribery*'s speaker, we argue, authenticity is a necessary part of his method which aims at beginning again and at circumventing neoliberalism's individualising tendencies, which make his efforts to change the status quo feel futile. Similarly to earlier American writers like Franklin or Thoreau, self-development, for *Bribery*'s speaker, becomes a route towards precision and humility, a way to reimagine his community without elevating himself and resorting to easy moralism. *Bribery* is an experimental project that works methodically to generate something precise and surprising without relying on randomness and abstraction.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 March 2022
Accepted 14 January 2023

KEYWORDS
Contemporary literature; American poetry; conceptual writing; constrained writing

In *Saint Genet*, Jean-Paul Sartre attempts to explain what motivated Jean Genet, author of a series of autobiographical tales of vagrancy, theft and prostitution, to embark on his emblematic journey of moral degradation.[1] Abandoned by his mother when he was very young, Genet grew up in a rural milieu that treated the petty crimes he committed while still a child as an indication of what his future would be: he was condemned to lead a life of crime. According to Sartre, for Genet, the curse that his community had cast upon him could only be resisted in a circuitous fashion: he would have to become evil of his own volition, as an emancipatory gesture.[2] Like Milton's fallen angel, he would rather be his own man than a character in someone else's story. Crime became his constraint, allowing him to make progress along a path which was, like that of virtue, filled with obstacles and trials waiting to be overcome. Thus, more than a critique of the society that had cast him aside, Genet's life-long project consisted in the affirmation and consecration of an inverted morality, a code of honour that could vindicate his unholy martyrdom.

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[1]Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 60.
[2]Ibid., 60.

Opening with a quote from Genet, the premise of Steven Zultanski's *Bribery*, an American book-length prose poem published in 2014, instantly brings the French malefactor to mind: its unnamed narrator wants, he flippantly tells us from the get-go, to be worse, to disappoint himself and those around him as much as possible. What, however, motivates this semi-humorous journey of self-degradation? Like Genet, *Bribery*'s poetic "I" believes that he is cursed. He is an American man, a designation that automatically makes him "the worst creature that ever existed … for all the reasons everyone already knows: the stupidity, the nationalism, the ideological attachment to ideas of independence and comfort; … ".[3] He begins from the idea that America is seen in the international community as the nexus of human evil; as an American man, he cannot help personifying that evil.[4]

The poetic subject acknowledges, moreover, the irony that he is "the worst kind of American, the kind who criticises // all these things and benefits from them for the most part fairly unapologetically" even though he "abstractly wish[es] things were different"[5] and sometimes participates in mass protests against the status quo. As Marie Buck points out in her review of the book, *Bribery*'s narrator gives voice to a contemporary mood, stronger among American progressives, of ethical and political entrapment, the "dual sense that many people in the U.S. have of powerlessness and personal responsibility" creating and exacerbating "intense feelings of guilt".[6] Despite being politically active, "many of us", Buck notes, feel like "we are cogs in the imperialist machine".[7]

In *Bribery*, Zultanski attempts to think his way out of this impasse that has characterised American political culture in the early twenty-first century. But although the problem the poet sets out to address is a practical one, his quest takes him on a rather abstract route. Because there is nothing positive he can do that can change his position as a passenger on the national shame train, *Bribery*'s narrator decides, like Genet, to get on the driver's seat and take control over his pre-assigned role as the personification of evil. In order to take real responsibility for America's sins, to become the ultimate evil that others claim he is, he will have to imagine crimes of the worst possible kind. This method of poetic thinking takes ideas to their absurd-sounding but gruesomely logical extremes. As we show in this article, the precision of the writing and thinking deny the reader any easy moralism in assessing the narrator's violent conclusions. In fact, they help naturalise those conclusions, making them seem inherently American.

In order to tease out the implications of Zultanski's project, we will, first, elaborate on *Bribery's* speaker's logic and his attempts at becoming worse. Secondly, we relate it to the long-running scholarly conversation about authenticity, the search for which we view as central in how *Bribery's* speaker avoids easy moralism. Authenticity is ultimately, as Jonna Eagle has recently noted, intertwined with violence and it "makes … a moral

[3]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 20. Quotations from *Bribery* quoted by permission. © Steven Zultanski (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014).
[4]According to *Bribery*'s speaker, "New York City is the worst place ever … ", and it "is the symbolic center of the world, when bad things happen elsewhere … it's still // to blame". Ibid., 64.
[5]Ibid., 20.
[6]Buck, "The Mood of Steven Zultanski's 'Bribery.'"
[7]Ibid. One should note that the feeling of political impotence that *Bribery*'s speaker grapples with is not a strictly American phenomenon but rather something that resonates with left-wingers throughout the west. For example, in *After the Great Refusal*, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen draws upon Adorno and Bürger to point out how easily forms of political resistance, both social and aesthetic, are converted into toothless objects of tourism and entertainment, making artists and activists involuntarily complicit with the very structures they wish to contest.

claim".[8] In the field of poetry, the debate on authenticity has recently become inseparable from the issue of appropriation, a paramount concern for some of today's most prominent poetic experimenters associated with Conceptual Poetry, whose work we briefly discuss, showing how Zultanski redefines this approach and uses unoriginality for the purposes of his precise method. Thirdly, we claim that Zultanski's fight against self-deception is a quintessentially American one in that it can be linked to the efforts of American pioneers and nineteenth century writers to regenerate their community through punishing self-examination and humiliating confession. Despite the book's gruesomeness, *Bribery*'s rogue operates according to a logic of (inverted) self-improvement, which we also try to contextualise. Thus, the key interlinked components of Zultanski's project are *authenticity, unoriginality, regeneration* and *self-improvement*, all of which we elaborate on below.

Moreover, we discuss Zultanski's method, which we relate to John Cage's quasi-scientific experiments with constrained chance. We claim that for Zultanski, meaningful authenticity entails maximal inauthenticity. Finally, we explain how Zultanski's project converses with present-day political theory on issues like "liberal self-flagellation", the term that Angela Nagle uses to describe the valuation of private morality over collective action.[9] We show that, despite its protagonist's saintly travails, *Bribery* attempts to surpass being a mere exercise in facile moralism. Rather, the book and Zultanski's speaker advocate for being more critical of our moralising tendencies (which often foreclose political debate) and more judicious in how we fight for communal change.

A Journey of Self-Determination, or Encountering One's Evil

In order to begin to comprehend how *Bribery*'s logic functions, we can consider the early parts of the book which are almost entirely given over to tirades where the speaker goes over his logic:

> So how about this: I rob a bank twice.
>
> I just walk into a bank, say, in Williamsburg, with a black baseball cap pulled down over my eyes, …
>
> ……
> The next day, around the same time,
> I walk into the same bank wearing the same black cap, approach the same teller, and demand the same amount of money; it works.
>
> ……
> The whole point is to do something
> that no one would like. If I robbed the bank once, everyone would
>
> like it, because there's something romantic about a bank robbery.
>
> After all, banks are dipshits. But by robbing the same bank twice, I might
> convince the public mind, as if there was one, that I'm not a romantic figure. It'll see, as if it saw anything, that I'm a dipshit … [10]

[8] Eagle, "Introduction," 127.
[9] Nagle, "The Scourge of Self-Flagellating Politics."
[10] Zultanski, *Bribery*, 5–6.

The quotation shows how the narrator's logic develops through short passages where his trains of thought are taken to a seemingly absurd level of precision. Here as elsewhere throughout the book, Zultanski's criminal cautiously goes over every potential course of action (as if they were permutations in an Oulipian poem) and weighs the corresponding moral implications. The speaker's thought threads are by default long and complicated, circling between specific examples and more generic pronouncements. Robbing a bank just once would not make him look bad because there would be "something romantic" about it.[11] However, if he were to rob the same bank again, his actions, because more mundane and predictable, would be more meaningfully shameful. As the speaker remarks here and throughout, the key to becoming worse is to commit *unoriginal* crimes in ways that do not allow him to be vindicated.

The speaker's method of precision is, thus, characterised by unoriginality combined with careful calculation. In an interview for *Jacket2* on the occasion of his earlier book *Agony*, which is similarly focused on trying out different options, Zultanski argues that in order to compose something genuinely surprising, one has to avoid the kind of "wishy-washy 'poetic thinking' that moves diffusely and openly and quote-unquote pleasurably in all directions, or something like that".[12] Zultanski is here referring to what Felix Bernstein calls the "aesthetics of empty and vapid indeterminacy", an approach to poetic composition championed by the influential vanguardist movements of the sixties and the eighties, poets associated, for example, with Language Writing, favouring works that celebrated, through jarring juxtapositions, the experientially incongruous and the conceptually anomalous.[13] Rather than plunge straight into strangeness, as Zultanski goes on to note in the same interview, "one has to take logic and thinking completely seriously in order to arrive at a paradox or a contradiction".[14]

Bribery's criminal mastermind's style has a quasi-scientific element. Ironically, he can only own up to the original sin that marks him as fallen by default through a thoroughly unoriginal method, appropriating the crimes of others and tweaking them ever so slightly, which allows him to make his crimes surprising and specific. The only way for the poetic "I" to fully understand the extent of his and his country's evil, to unravel the impasse that he finds himself in and meaningfully participate in his community, is to make the crimes he is accused of truly his own through painstaking trial and error. The tone of his quest is at once dead-pan serious and hilariously absurd.

As an American man, the poetic "I" is accused of having committed all kinds of immoral acts and, thus, of being a many-faced villain. He thinks he is guilty by default. In trying to assume responsibility for that guilt he cannot, however, merely copy the crimes of others; he will have to make these crimes his own, suitably calibrating them so that his individual guilt does not evaporate. For example, prototypical "random murders won't make [him] worse".[15] If he were, for example, to kill someone and cut their body apart with an electric chainsaw, because there is a certain "romantic madness"[16] to the crime, most of the guilt that it would naturally arouse would be

[11]Ibid., 5.
[12]Zultanski and Gallagher, "Interview with Steven Zultanski".
[13]Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, 22.
[14]Zultanski and Gallagher, "Interview with Steven Zultanski."
[15]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 6.
[16]Ibid., 7.

abstracted away, becoming generic. He cannot, that is, act in a standardly erratic or disjunctive manner because his crimes can then "too easily be absorbed into a logic of so-called mental illness".[17] If he is to do something uniquely disturbing and feel as guilty as he desires, the poetic "I" will have to carefully fine-tune his crimes.

For the sake of clarity let us consider two other examples. The poetic "I" decides he is going to try to rape a woman. Before doing so, however, he finds a way to make the future crime even more sinister by picturing the act in his head before he commits it: "I thought it would be worse if I pictured what I was about to do before I did it, so that it would feel both more premeditated and more inevitably disappointing".[18] The narrator also spends some time debating what the best way of approaching the woman would be as well as what he would have to say to her to make the crime as cruel as possible. Also illustrative of his bizarre meticulousness, the poetic "I" breaks into a woman's home merely to stare at her while she sleeps, the latter being the most disturbing thing he could do to his victim. Any other course of action would normalise the crime, turning him into an off-the-shelf villain whose guilt would once again be generic and disabling.

The speaker, thus, suggests that in order to free himself from the guilt he has inherited he will, ironically, have to become a thief, a bully and a sex offender, which is what he feels he is accused of as an American man. He points out that "It's not good enough for me // that we're responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people all over the world"; only becoming worse will enable "this shit country to exist again tomorrow".[19] Becoming worse is the mode he chooses to purify himself of the crimes of his people, such as "coercive economic policies" or "our boring corporate entertainment".[20]

In the epigraphic statement that opens *Bribery*, Genet accuses artists of disrespecting real-life rogues when they use crime to feed their fictional pedantries.[21] However, there is very little gratuitousness to *Bribery*'s bizarre parade of delinquencies. As we contend, *Bribery* is built on the premise that the nameless narrator's highly impersonal thought experiments provide him with crucial insight into himself and the extent of his egotism, which good intentions and high ideals often serve to disguise. His is not, however, a self-aggrandising exercise in unproductive moralism, as will become clear throughout the rest of the article.

Zultanski's speaker feels guilty for upholding the status quo of American evil, which he does for example by "abstractly wishing things were different while diligently working the kind of day job at a non-profit that keeps them exactly the same".[22] His bluntness about his own shortcomings is an essential part of his method of precision. His descent into crime can be seen as a quest for "sovereignty", as Sartre notes about Genet.[23] There is a mismatch between who he perceives himself to be and who his conscience claims he is, so, in order to have control over himself (and thus attain sovereignty), he will need to, as Sartre puts it, "encounter this substance that defines him" (his supposed criminal nature); he will have to make an effort to coincide with what he already is, an aim that can

[17] Ibid., 43.
[18] Ibid., 39.
[19] Ibid., 20–21.
[20] Ibid., 21.
[21] "*The utilization of crime by an artist is impious. Someone risks his life, his glory, only to be used as ornament for a dilettante.* – Jean Genet". Zultanski, *Bribery*, n.p.
[22] Zultanski, *Bribery*, 20.
[23] Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 73.

be connected to sincerity and authenticity.[24] Paradoxically, he can only be himself by becoming something he is not: a crime artist. Moreover, the more specific (or "original") *Bribery's* speaker's crimes are, the more he will feel like his life's script has not been written for him in advance, common crimes being easy to attribute to a general type of criminal whose shoes one merely fills. The meaner the crimes he conceives, the more "sincere" he will be, as they will make visible a "self … which by reason of his culpability [will] be regarded as more peculiarly [his own]", as Lionel Trilling writes in *Sincerity and Authenticity*.[25] Sincerity, Trilling explains, is intricately connected to "authenticity" which is "a more strenuous moral experience" than sincerity.[26] Becoming authentic in a morally strenuous way that is honest about one's own shortcomings is integral to *Bribery*'s speaker's endeavour, because it can free him from the throes of routine that allow him to uphold the status quo as an American man. To understand this quest for authenticity better, we can turn to considering the book's notion of American evil before discussing authenticity further.

Authenticity and Appropriation, or Getting to the Root of All Evil

Throughout *Bribery*, "America" functions more than anything as a symbol of extreme evil, just as much as it did in the apocalyptic sermons of the hypervigilant Puritans that crossed the Atlantic in the 1600s, a tradition Zultanski's project (indirectly) converses with. According to Patrick N. Allitt, in the opinion of the nation's founders, Americans were not just endemically corrupted by original sin (as the rest of humanity) but, when measured against their unusually high standards, were the worst sinners of all, as made clear by the harshness of their Jeremiads (sermons that listed the community's sins).[27] The story of America as a nation with a purpose that is always in danger of failing is persistent,[28] and Zultanski cannot avoid this idea. He seems to be, however, more interested in the notion of American evil that is rooted in moral strictness than in the exceptionalist idea that America has a unique position in the world.[29] A paradox that vexes Zultanski's speaker is that, ironically, in order to do good one is often compelled to become evil. For Zultanski, the exceptional nature of American evil functions fundamentally as a heuristic trope, useful not only because of the global reach of American-flavored neoliberalism but also because of how, in his view, as we show later, this American project of the search for supreme evil is vital for the recalibration of present-day leftist politics, both in the US and elsewhere in the west.

"[L]ike a good American, I want it all to start with me" (22),[30] *Bribery*'s narrator notes in a declaration that invokes the spirit of the mythical American pioneer. D. H. Lawrence describes this traditional American hero as "a man who turns his back on … society" but "keeps his moral integrity hard and intact", "[an] isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring

[24]Ibid., 75, 72.
[25]Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 5.
[26]Ibid., 11.
[27]Allitt, *American Religious History*; see also Miller, "Errand into the Wilderness", 8–10.
[28]For example, Perry Miller, in his 1953 essay "Errand into the Wilderness", and others in his time, considered America to be more or less failed as it was so focused on material success, as Abram C. van Engen discusses. Miller, "Errand into the Wilderness," 13–15; van Engen, "How America Became 'A City Upon a Hill'".
[29]see e.g., Brooks, *American Exceptionalism*, 72.
[30]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 22.

man, who lives by death, by killing", "who kills in order to live".[31] Zultanski's anti-hero kills in order to think. Murder is a method he must follow to regain control over his fate and possibly regenerate his community. As Richard Slotkin explains, the first American heroes were charged with the task of carrying out a "purifying regression to the primitive".[32] Europe was an old and decadent world in which authentic self-expression was shackled by laws, hierarchies and traditions. The amoral pursuit of American heroes was thus for a wild place of untainted authenticity where history could begin again, with renewed vigour.

In more general terms, authenticity and its root sincerity are about being true to oneself and closely related to something dark and primitive, which is a clear premise for *Bribery* whose speaker wishes "to be true to life" and to own up to his "guilt".[33] According to Trilling, the concern that works like Zultanski's express about authenticity is a distinctly modern one, flowing from the relatively recent belief that the worst kind of deception is not so much the sort someone metes out to others but that "which a person works upon herself".[34] For a number of centuries, this belief has motivated an "unmasking trend" in Western culture which popularised works that exact "a systematic search for deception and self-deception" with the aim of "uncovering … [the] underlying truth", as Henri F. Ellenberger puts it in *The Discovery of the Unconscious*.[35] The assumption is that our "best self coexists with another self, less good in the public moral way", which ought to come to light if we are to be true to ourselves.[36] As Trilling notes, Nathaniel Hawthorne phrased authenticity's imperative most pithily when he wrote in *The Scarlet Letter*: "Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred". According to Trilling, the search for this worst aspect of ourselves is said to entail a "downward movement", the goal being to travel to the proverbial "heart of darkness", "to some place where all movement ends, and begins".[37] Eagle remarks that Trilling's notion of authenticity points to its association with primitiveness and violence.[38] Authenticity has a dark side which, as Eagle writes with reference to Trilling, manifests in how those in positions of power can use the concept of realness as a way of subjecting others to "primitive" positions, which Eagle connects to "imperialist and colonialist practices that animate [authenticity] in the context of American history and culture".[39]

The notion of authenticity has been viewed through many different models. [40] In another sense, authenticity refers to an innate, untainted self, which is a model that can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau according to Somogy Varga, Charles Guignon and Trilling.[41] Rousseau thought that, in Guignon's words, "society, and the mutual dependence, inequality, servitude and oppression it creates" destroys our authenticity.[42] In this understanding of authenticity, our inner selves are inherently good.[43] However,

[31]Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 62, 59.
[32]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 34.
[33]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 14, 24.
[34]Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 16.
[35]Ibid., 141.
[36]Ibid., 5.
[37]Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 12.
[38]Eagle, "Introduction," 127–28.
[39]Eagle, 128.
[40]See Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, 10.
[41]Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*, 61–62; Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, 55–60; Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 93.
[42]Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, 56; see also Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 93.
[43]Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, 57.

the other side of the coin is that authenticity's connection with "realness" and "goodness" means that it indeed comes to be associated with primitiveness.[44] As Eagle writes, the kind of authenticity that Rousseau espouses is connected to "racism, colonialism, and imperialism", particularly through his concept of the "savage man".[45]

Later on, in a more recent sense of the term, "[t]he postmodern ideal" of authenticity[46] acknowledged that the self is a construct. As an antidote to the problems caused by postmodern lack of coherence, according to Guignon, in another model of authenticity, "each of us composes a personal identity out of the materials we find in the surrounding cultural context".[47] Therefore, authenticity is, in one sense, something primitive that can be reached by travelling downwards. In another sense, it can become corrupted and destroyed and in yet another sense, it is something that can be constructed.

Fittingly for the sense of authenticity that is associated with primitiveness and violence, Zultanski's nameless persona tells us that his aim is to "get to the bottom" of things, to "descend … into hell" in pursuit of his worst self.[48] As Trilling makes plain, however, accomplishing the latter is no easy feat, most notably because we do not really know what to look for.[49] If authenticity is something that can be destroyed by society, we can say that society has destroyed *Bribery*'s speaker by making him complicit, for instance, in "the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people all over the world", a guilt that he assumes for himself by virtue of his being American.[50] Ironically, in *Bribery*, the narrator can only reach his worst self by way of his community's representation of him and of itself as evil. He thus must travel not deeper within himself but farther out.

In figurative terms, *Bribery's* speaker has already committed all crimes that are humanly conceivable. This explains why Zultanski composed *Bribery* using true crime stories scraped off the internet, as Kenneth Goldsmith has noted.[51] Paradoxically, the poetic "I" must discover himself through the crimes of others. This is *Bribery*'s greatest irony: it is a first-person confession of crimes which have either never happened or were committed by someone else and yet it is only more personal and authentic because of that. *Bribery*'s "I" is therefore surely aware, too, of the postmodern ideal of authenticity. Not only has he constructed himself from his culture and thus feels guilty, but the speaker's story, quite literally, becomes composed of materials found in the surrounding cultural context. Zultanski conflates his speaker and himself as the writer as he appropriates the crimes that are needed for the speaker to become worse. For Zultanski the writer, this is of course a thought experiment rather than a confession.

Conventionally, "the authority of the confessional voice finds its source in the authenticity of the speaker's testimony", says Jonathan Holden, author of *Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry*.[52] The same holds for *Bribery*, but, counter-intuitively, the poetic "I" has to lie in order to be truthful (i.e., he must borrow and/or fabricate identities in

[44]Eagle, "Introduction," 129.
[45]Ibid.
[46]Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, 119.
[47]Ibid., 127.
[48]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 92, 22.
[49]Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 5.
[50]Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*, 61–62; Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, 55–60; Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 93; Zultanski, *Bribery*, 21.
[51]Goldsmith, "Post-Internet Poetry Comes of Age."
[52]Holden, *Style and Authenticity*, 27.

order to be himself). Genet's epigraph should thus be read ironically. Zultanski's appropriation of other voices is not so much an aesthetic choice as a matter of necessity, the lives of the criminals he scavenges being more authentically his than his own. In the same way that Genet had to effect a "critical deconstruction of himself" and to "fade behind the work",[53] as Colby Dickinson puts it, in order to stay true to who he was meant to be, Zultanski's poetic "I" can only become who he supposedly is by erasing himself. The speaker states, while discussing a crime that involves breaking into somebody's home and "leav[ing] chains lying thousand years from when we fell around in ritualistically suggestive poses",

> that many bigger crimes make more sense, they fit into a legible ideological and technocratic structure, while my particular style of worsening simply makes less sense; it's harder to attribute all my actions to one identifiable person or intention … .[54]

His self-erasure is thus related to his overall goal of becoming worse as a conceptual project. But whereas Genet accomplished his mission by travelling deeper into the self, letting out "that other that is himself",[55] Zultanski's aim can only be fulfilled by travelling outwards and letting others speak for him. Authenticity, he realises, is not so much a matter of depth but something we find at the surface.[56] Ironically, in order to be himself, he must become impersonal. Impersonality and authenticity may seem like strange bedfellows but, as Trilling reminds us, authors like T. S. Eliot and James Joyce saw the "continual extinction of personality" as essential to the process of "self-scrutiny". Changing his story by appropriating others' crimes and becoming impersonal, then, is a part of adopting a methodical approach to authenticity that looks at the concept from several sides. Another part of the method is a focused mode of self-improvement, through which Zultanski's project corresponds with earlier American writers, and it is to this that we now turn.

Bribery's Literary Roots: Authenticity and Self-Improvement in American Literature

In his attempts to conjure up shameful scenarios and imagine himself in extreme circumstances, Zultanski's work calls to mind the litanies of Puritan doomsayers, the aforementioned Jeremiads. These texts listed the most depraved practices of the community and served to show how far the people of the New World had strayed from God's mission. Because they saw themselves as God's elect, Americans were necessarily held to a higher standard of morality. This, in turn, bred constant self-loathing and a sense that the end of times was just around the corner. The imminence of judgement made sins more salient and purification an urgent matter. As exercises in "self-condemnation", jeremiads were, as Sacvan Bercovitch explains, nonetheless pervaded by an unshakable optimism.[57] Bercovitch notes that, as a "fallen people", the crimes of American pioneers not only confirmed their promise but quickened its realisation.[58] It is this same belief in the revelatory and

[53]Dickinson, *Postmodern Saints of France*, 15.
[54]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 28.
[55]Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 75.
[56]In *Bribery*, the navel is metaphorically portrayed as a port of access to one's inner essence, even though "sometimes the navel is all surface". Zultanski, *Bribery*, 8.
[57]Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*.
[58]Ibid.

regenerative power of sin that Zultanski brings to *Bribery*. Most importantly, the renewed trust he places in this ancestral power of self-analysis and moral vigilance represents, as we argue, the most immediate and vital payoff of the poem's political work.

Instead of merely hankering for a primitive simplicity to rid him of his and his society's evilness, *Bribery*'s speaker emphasises the importance of the journey to the wilderness as a method of precision. Through his search for authenticity, the poetic "I" of *Bribery* attempts to bring America and himself towards their origins, to a primeval wilderness where something can begin again. William Cronon describes such a quintessentially American conception of wilderness in a way that is illustrative here:

> Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, it is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are.[59]

Cronon, of course, criticises this conception in his essay, noting that "wilderness" is, for all intents and purposes, a fantasy which never existed, and which insists on separating people and nature, so that by holding on to the fantasy we can "forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit".[60] Nevertheless, a vision of the wilderness as a beacon of hope characterises the goals of Zultanski's speaker. In the wilderness, he can encounter his authenticity and the realities of his country. Of course, Zultanski's speaker's goal is as much a fantasy as the wilderness Cronon depicts. As an antidote to the banalities of contemporary life, where " … the US, and especially New York, finances // the world's endless atrocities" and where he is "still embedded in the city's guilt", he embarks on an arduous self-development project.[61] His attempt to arrive at wilderness, to rid himself "from the way society practices [its] beliefs and values"[62] somewhat like Henry David Thoreau does in his retreat into wilderness, is a way for him to recover the "lost soul"[63] of himself and his society. Only *Bribery*'s speaker accomplishes this not through a retreat into a literal wilderness, but a moral one.

The crimes of Zultanski's speaker evoke, by inverse analogy, the trials the likes of Benjamin Franklin and Thoreau devised to better themselves. While Zultanski's premise is, as we noted earlier, conceptual, and impersonality and dissolving the self in a postmodern fashion are at the core of his self-development project, in certain respects he can be compared to these nineteenth-century thinkers. Like Zultanski's narrator, Franklin believed that one's fate could be changed through one's actions, i.e., that "who you are is a function of what you do", as Alain Craig, author of a study about Franklin's philosophy of self-improvement, explains.[64] According to Craig, Franklin would often test himself by taking up polemic rhetorical positions. He would do it "for dispute's sake", to see what kinds of roles he could assume and evaluate their merits.[65]

[59]Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 80.
[60]Ibid., 80–81.
[61]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 64, 65.
[62]Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 8.
[63]Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 80.
[64]Craig, *Benjamin Franklin*, 3.
[65]Ibid., 10.

Even though the goal of Zultanski's narrator is to become worse, both his and Franklin's projects are motivated by similar ideas about the value of experimentation and hard work for purposes of self-development. This is made particularly clear at the end of Zultanski's book, where the narrator attempts to upset his girlfriend by confessing all his crimes and is surprisingly told: "You can do better than that".[66] The fact that this ironic line acts as the book's final statement could not be more illuminating. Although he had set out to denigrate America and himself, the poem shows us that its protean villain ought to be understood as the mirror image of America's prototypical do-gooder, attempting to reach a similar plateau of self-knowledge but travelling in the opposite direction.

We can say that Thoreau's travails set an even clearer precedent for Zultanski's prospective rampage. Thoreau's experiments in self-culture and self-discipline resonate with Zultanski's not only in their stringency but in their goal of bringing one closer to truth by way of authenticity. A primitivist, Thoreau thought that a solitary life in the wild could liberate one from mainstream culture's artificiality and put the individual in touch with his inner gods. He sought "a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" and wanted "to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically".[67] Cavell writes that Thoreau sought to "declare independence from the way society practices [its] beliefs and values" in order to arrive at an "expression" of America.[68] Thoreau's experiment in *Walden* was a quest not for self-improvement for its own sake but for returning to the "moment of origin" of his nation "in order this time to do it right, or to prove that it is impossible", something that Cavell argues all American writers would like to do.[69]

Zultanski's speaker also aligns himself with Thoreau when, as we noted, he describes himself as "the worst kind of American" who criticises the status quo but does little to change things.[70] Thoreau wrote against such sanctimonious stances in "Civil Disobedience" when he described people who opposed slavery but expected that the "majority" would remedy the situation for them instead of themselves stepping up to do what is "right".[71] Thoreau thinks that people should be moral and withdraw their support for what is wrong, because that can change the situation even if they do not wholly dedicate themselves to change.[72] In other words, a kind of moral authenticity is at play for Thoreau, as he writes against "[s]ocial and intellectual conformity" which, for him, according to Jane Bennett, is the only way he can retain his "individuality".[73] Bennett states that "[o]nly in a setting that surprises and is in some significant way unfamiliar can Thoreau live deliberately" and avoid being consumed by the ordinary.[74] Understood thus, Thoreau's project shares similarities with Zultanski's, who experiments with producing something surprising in order to be authentic. An inveterate contrarian, Thoreau,

[66]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 97.
[67]Thoreau, *Walden*, 21.
[68]Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 8, 32.
[69]Cavell, 8.
[70]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 20.
[71]Thoreau, *Walden*, 446.
[72]Thoreau, 448–50.
[73]Bennett, "Thoreau's Techniques of Self," 295.
[74]Ibid., 295, 297.

with his calculated attacks on received knowledge, sets the tone for Zultanski's peculiar thought experiments.

In addition to nineteenth century writers, *Bribery* corresponds with present-day poets and their approach to authenticity and the self. In the discussion of "who's who in contemporary poetry", Zultanski is one of the poets Felix Bernstein, in his *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, associates with "post-conceptual poetry", a style of writing that aligns itself with "post-postmodernism" and that follows the 1970s and 1980s expression-critical phenomenon Language Writing, thereby reacting to it.[75] In Bernstein's narrative, Language Writing was "poststructuralist", heavily theoretical and political, and "post-postmodernism", he postulates, carries on these moves in an attempt to return to "affect, emotion, and ego" in refigured ways.[76] *Bribery*'s speaker is concerned with the ego and the notion of authenticity, but he does this through using conceptual methods, as we have discussed. It is this combination that establishes Zultanski as a post-conceptual writer, someone who is interested in unoriginality like conceptual poets often are,[77] but who refines this interest towards a more precise method.

Furthermore, Bernstein notes that "post-conceptual poetry", like Language Writing before it, grapples with the political and cultural issues of its time, particularly with "[t]he danger [of] plunging into the abyss of complicity" in *neoliberalism*, a word that appears often in his discussion.[78] He reminds us that Fredric Jameson described Language Writing as "empty neoliberal drivel", an argument that was later refuted by a number of critics, and proceeds to ask: "Am I, is this, neoliberal *mise en abyme*? Am I, is this, inscrutable drivel?".[79] Bernstein is seemingly not sure whether post-conceptual poetry can escape being complicit in neoliberalism any more than Language Writing could.

Indeed, many recent writers have run into an impasse when they have attempted to respond to problems posed by neoliberal society. For instance, Christopher S. Nealon writes about left-leaning poets and journalists who were writing during and after the 2008 financial crisis that they "struggle with how to imagine the unimaginable—an end to capitalism without a conceivable revolution" and "how to imagine changing capitalism from within, when the only option seems to be to continue doing exactly what caused the crisis in the first place".[80] The problem here is that neoliberalism, as Wendy Brown affirms, subjects both people and countries under its logic, requiring them to seek constant growth and to ensure their individual value.[81] Furthermore, as Brown argues elsewhere, the fact that the neoliberalist individual "bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints of his action" discourages people from working together for change.[82]

[75]Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, 22–23, 36.
[76]Ibid., 36–7.
[77]As noted for example by Michael Leong, conceptual poetry's association with unoriginality in the sense of "copying and appropriation" is one of the reasons why conceptual poetry was heavily criticized in the mid-2010s, particularly in discussions of its lack of concern for antiracism. However, unoriginality is also where Leong finds the seed for new possibilities for conceptual poetry in his discussion of work by Black writers such as Claudia Rankine and M. NourbeSe Philip. Zultanski's premises are quite different from theirs, but his work is still invested in taking conceptual writing beyond mere unoriginality. Leong, "Conceptualisms in Crisis", 110–11.
[78]Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, 33.
[79]Ibid., 33, 78.
[80]Nealon, *Matter of Capital*, 140.
[81]Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 22.
[82]Brown, *Edgework*, 42–3.

Bribery's speaker feels that America is the worst in many of the ways that neoliberalism presents itself, including a host of issues like "globalization" or "the centrality of market economics" that rely on privatisation and shoulder responsibility on to individuals.[83] The drive to individualism contributes to the sense of "powerlessness and personal responsibility" that, as we noted earlier, Marie Buck identifies as central to *Bribery*.[84] This sense can foment blaming the self and bar people from considering the big picture. A concrete example of this kind of thinking where individual and collective responsibilities collide was offered by Judith Butler in her 2004 book *Precarious Life*, when she noted that in the context of post-9/11, the Left's consideration of the reasons for the conflicts and the ensuing war was viewed as a vote of support for terrorism.[85] According to Butler, the Left's assumption of blame and a "self-flagellating" stance made it difficult to thoroughly consider the reasons and causes of problems.[86] Butler's discussion, though referring to different circumstances, testifies to the recent history of such thinking. Zultanski's speaker finds himself in a similar quandary regarding the problems that he outlines, unable to distinguish between origins and causes, between guilt and exoneration, between individual and collective responsibility, and therefore he needs a precise method.

Neoliberalism crucially also complicates authenticity. Whereas for someone like Thoreau authenticity was desirable for its own sake, in neoliberalism authenticity becomes both a threat and a promise. According to Jeffrey T. Nealon, "the intensive authenticity of your own private experience" is easily viewed as the only way out of the neoliberal contemporary world.[87] On the other hand, Varga argues, capitalism instils in people the systemic notion that authenticity is desirable.[88] In this "*performative* model of authenticity", which for example self-help books often sell, authenticity is sought not for its own sake but "for achieving happiness and wealth".[89] Contemporary life abounds with self-help manuals, which place a prime value on authenticity in the sense of working to upgrade your life.[90] Individual people who attempt to function in this situation are compelled to *manage* their authenticity. Neoliberalism thus drives authenticity into a complex impasse. *Bribery*'s speaker notes that his "wishing to be worse is a long and painful ongoing personal project, like yoga or chemotherapy", [91] a deeply ironic statement that reveals his efforts in self-development as a parody of the neoliberal self. Of course, the speaker, as we have discussed, does not seek authenticity for the sake of securing "happiness" or "wealth". He hopes to find a way out of the impasse and to clear space for meaningful action through his method which is obsessed with precision of thought to a deeply comic degree.

In *Bribery*, the end point of the journey to wilderness through writing is not a new and better America, but a kind of a dead zone where the poetic "I's" story, along with his relationship with his girlfriend, continues for thousands of years: "Hundreds of years

[83]Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, 15–21.
[84]Buck, "The Mood of Steven Zultanski's 'Bribery.'"
[85]Butler, *Precarious Life*, 3.
[86]Ibid., 15–16.
[87]Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, 37.
[88]Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*, 127.
[89]Ibid., 127–28; original italics.
[90]Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, viii; Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, 31–32; Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*, 128.
[91]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 42.

passed, and through them all // the world remained the worst, while our love only got worse, and stronger".[92] Ultimately society seems to have reached an end point:

But eventually, a
thousand years from when we fell in love, when there was no more

US (divvied up) or New York City (underwater) …,
there just weren't that many humans left

to fight with each other, or to police national borders.

The centres of evil have been annihilated, and the speaker has arrived in a de facto wilderness, but his quest for authenticity through self-degradation is never-ending. The goal remains forever out of reach: as we noted above, his girlfriend tells him, in the final sentence of the book, that he could "do better".[93] Unsurprisingly, total authenticity proves to be unattainable, but the gist of *Bribery* is ultimately the process of experimentation, the method of precision that guides the speaker's interminable efforts.

"Unpredictably Unpredictable", or The Science of Authenticity

Zultanski's measured approach to experimentation evokes the work of John Cage, who, like *Bribery*'s author, wanted to keep the level of randomness in his art to a minimum. As Zultanski's poetic persona explains, "randomness alone explains itself. Nothing's easier to imagine than chaos".[94] Committing random crimes, as we noted before, would not at all help his case because, randomness being an abstraction, his actions would easily lose their specificity and he would be deprived of his particular guilt. According to poetry scholar Ming Qian Ma, Cage similarly argues that nothing unique can ever come out of something composed in an arbitrary fashion. For Cage, improvised art was "conditioned response, always circling back to habits".[95] Glossing Cage, Ma notes that "to the extent that it is already a form of cultural artefact", chance is a "formula" or a "methodized" form of discourse.[96] In other words, as soon as it is made conceivable and replicable, randomness is no longer random. As Ma explains, for Cage, "to break away from any methodical gridlock … one has to deliberately mimic that method as one's point of departure".[97] This explains why Cage termed his works "chance operations", his aim being, counter-intuitively, to produce randomness through a procedure of "predetermined moves on which each step is serialized into a fixed causal position or relation".[98] There is, that is to say, a quasi-mathematical ("if X then Y") kind of rigidity to the artist's chaotic contraptions. His goal being to design crimes that are "unpredictably unpredictable",[99] Zultanski cannot rely on received notions of randomness, having instead to work methodically to understand what particular directions might be worth exploring.

[92]Ibid., 88.
[93]Ibid., 97.
[94]Ibid., 9.
[95]Ma, *Poetry as Re-Reading*, 117.
[96]Ibid., 116.
[97]Ibid., 118.
[98]Ibid., 126.
[99]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 12.

According to Ma, John Cage's "Trojan horse" approach to the artistic struggle against habit is ultimately marked by a strong parodic and satirical component.[100] Paradoxically, Ma goes on to note,

> chance, once employed as an operation in the name of 'freeing the ego', maximally amplifies its ego-centered procedure … shocking it into a critical realization of its own persistent presence in/as deeply entrenched 'methodness' even at its most liberal or utopian.[101]

In other words, from Ma's perspective, Cage's goal was to make his audience aware of rationality's pervasiveness: even the most apparently unrestrained and chaotic artistic endeavours have always already been somewhat predetermined by logic and habit, their potential strangeness and radicalness being foreclosed from the get-go. Ma goes on to argue that Cage wanted to "[shock] the cultural, habitual mind-set out of its unconscious" and adopted a "strategy of extremism".[102]

Despite the gruesomeness of some of the crimes the poetic "I" claims to have committed, his approach is not one of extremism. Unlike Cage's, Zultanski's goal is not to shock his audience; the speaker's crimes merely realise a necessary route of investigation. In fact, the success of some of his villainous actions depends upon there being "nothing shocking" about them.[103] More spectacular and blatantly aggravating crimes are, as we noted before, also easier to explain away and Zultanski wants his persona's actions to be genuinely confusing. To accomplish that, he relies on "precise measurement", subtlety and "quick thinking",[104] the ever-present threat of generalising co-optation being addressed through continuous vigilance.

Although driven by a monomania and unswerving in his belief in logic's power to reveal true perplexities, flexibility is the speaker's most defining feature, the constraints of his project being often subjected to unexpected, but necessary, revisions. Most notably, halfway through the book, in what can be seen as a major turning point and yet another moment of searing parody, the narrator declares that "[c]rime is not enough"; if he truly wants to be the worst, he will have to follow the path of love, for love can give him "something great to fail to live up to", maximising the impact of his crimes.[105] Paradoxically, he can only be the worst by being, at the same time, the best. It is thus that his method adapts to the contradictions he finds along the way: his modus operandi is unpredictable but always consistent and convincing, with new constraints organically flowing from well-grounded conclusions.

Conclusion: The Precision of a Saint

There is something quintessentially American to the value Zultanski places on precision. His project of self-critique is a never-ending one because, as Joan Copjec explains, "we unburden ourselves by allowing the ideals set up by society to become blueprints for our identity and action".[106] We feel guilty because culture at once enjoins us to live up

[100]Ma, *Poetry as Re-Reading*, 117.
[101]Ibid., 122.
[102]Ibid., 118.
[103]Zultanski, *Bribery*, 15.
[104]Ibid., 7, 42.
[105]Ibid., 53.
[106]Copjec, "The Censorship of Interiority," 174.

to certain ideals and prevents us from ever attaining them. As we noted throughout, Zultanski is beholden to the idea of America, the "new world" of freedom and equality that he and his compatriots consistently fail to bring about. Like Herman Melville, whom Charles Olson praises, in *Call me Ishmael*, for dramatising his people's "guilt" with ruthless "accuracy",[107] Zultanski knows that the flipside of "the dream" of America is the nightmare of infinite "malice", that to attain the former, one must thoroughly comprehend the latter. As Perry Miller points out in *Nature's Nation*, America is, unlike other nations, a "deliberate construction", the proverbial goodness of the land and its people is never a given but instead must be sought out through intentional effort.[108] In a culture that revolves around the individual, guilt is also more easily privatised and subjectified. Thus, following Copjec's logic, Americans are burdened with additional responsibility because they cannot rely on the collective to spontaneously bring about a better state of affairs. This explains why, for both Melville and Zultanski, to keep the dream alive, evil must be rooted out in a quasi-scientific manner.

Zultanski sets a high standard for himself and his people but, in the end, what does his self-abasement project accomplish? How does *Bribery* relate to the current logic of leftist self-flagellation that, in an article for *Current Affairs* in 2017, Angela Nagle decried as a narcissistic holier-than-thou game with meagre practical gains? In her piece, "The Scourge of Self-Flagellating Politics", Nagle claims that present-day infighting among leftists and the contemporary sense of political deadlock can be explained by the general postulation of moral rectitude as the highest political aim.[109] In effect, as Mark Fisher points out in *Capitalist Realism*, the ethicalization of politics only plays into the hands of capitalism, which encourages us to "overvalue belief" (Fisher is here elaborating on an argument by Slavoj Žižek) "at the expense of the beliefs we exhibit and externalize in our behavior".[110] For her own part, Judith Butler notes that moralism is a get-out-of-jail-free card, exempting us from taking "responsibility, understood as taking stock of our world, and participating in its social transformation".[111] In a nutshell, "[s]o long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange".[112] This then begs the question of whether we should see Zultanski's project as a cop-out, a self-centred pursuit of the moral high ground with no ultimate bearing on the political circumstances it aims to critique.

In *Saints of the Impossible*, Alexander Irwin reminds us that this is not a uniquely contemporary dilemma.[113] Georges Bataille and Simone Weil, the scholar explains, likewise lived in a time of political deadlock (the 1930s) and similarly retreated into the realm of morality, refusing to participate in the fruitless disputes of their era. Irwin notes that "many intellectuals struggling in the political morass of the 1930s believed … political convulsions had 'spiritual' roots" and that revolution would have to be, above all, spiritual or otherwise nothing would really change.[114] There were few options beyond cynicism and withdrawal during a time when "peaceful communication between opposed

[107]Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 15.
[108]Miller, *Nature's Nation*, 3–7.
[109]Nagle, "The Scourge of Self-Flagellating Politics."
[110]Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 13.
[111]Butler, *Precarious Life*, 16–7.
[112]Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 13.
[113]Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible*.
[114]Ibid., xix.

groups" had become nearly impossible and the notions of virtue and morality had been rendered meaningless.[115] Faced with these conditions, Bataille and Weil turned towards the "sacred" and its "negative, transgressive and oppositional character" as "a device for positioning themselves in [their] cultural and political landscape", thus attempting to change the rules of civic engagement.[116]

Bataille, for example, opted for a politics of "sacrifice", using "inner violence" as a means to "shatter the self", an opposite logic to that which was at work in the war that raged around him, in which violence was used to destroy the other.[117] He "proposed a method, a training regimen" that turned death into a means of resistance against "political tyranny" and the "imprisoning limits of the self".[118] Here, still, the political meaningfulness of such acts of self-erasure is not at all apparent. In effect, Jean-Luc Nancy points out that what we learn from figures like Bataille and Weil is "a negative lesson", since their "invocation of the absolute alterity of the sacred" displays "contempt for the profane world (the world of ordinary politics and everyday, impure people)".[119] In other words, such figures' radical morality translates, in practice, into a refusal to compromise and collaborate with less-than-ideal allies towards the achievement of a common goal. However, Irwin asks us to see Bataille and Weil's moral projects in a more nuanced fashion. The scholar notes that their stance was not one of self-righteous extremism but rather one of "tactical self-positioning", a "posture of resistance" that prevented them from falling prey to comfortable moral commitments.[120]

Bribery's speaker wants to be worse, to embark on a journey of self-degradation in order to travel towards an original wilderness, towards the roots of America and its contemporary situation. As a self-avowed leftist, he faces an impasse of thinking, where action feels ineffective. To find a way out, he wants to purge himself of what restricts him in the current situation, which entails taking authenticity not as a guarantor of untainted goodness but as a place of humility and integrity. Similarly to earlier American writers like Franklin or Thoreau, self-development and self-determination are ways to see the nation as it is and to reimagine it, but for Zultanski, this happens in a negative way. *Bribery*'s speaker wants to step outside the leftist tendency to assume guilt and to blame the self, because this, he implies, leads to unproductive moralism. He wants to be true to himself and to ask, with humility and precision: Am I being moralistic? Am I being true to the cause or doing it to feel good about myself? He proposes that thinking through this requires him to adopt a precise method of experimentation and to harness chance to the task of producing something unique and surprising. He recalibrates the conceptual approach of repurposing existing texts towards a more precise post-conceptual tactic. Precision and nuance can enable him to step outside moralism and to find a place from which he can speak authentically, if only for a moment. Zultanski's is not an evasive stance; he does not avoid taking real action. Rather, he labours to bring his thinking out of the neoliberal impasse, to a place where action again becomes possible.

[115]Ibid., xxi.
[116]Ibid., xxiii.
[117]Ibid., 126.
[118]Ibid., 127–8.
[119]Nancy, *La communauté désouevrée*, 80, quoted in Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible*, 218; Ibid., 219.
[120]Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible*, 220.

Acknowledgements

João Paulo Guimarães's work was supported by the Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation. Elina Siltanen's work was supported by the Kone Foundation, the Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth Foundation and the Emil Aaltonen Foundation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Emil Aaltosen Säätiö; Irish Research Council; Koneen Säätiö; Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation and Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth Foundation.

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