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Poverty and Asceticism

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Poverty and Asceticism

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Introduction

Joanna Demers

The distinction between poverty and asceticism is supposedly one of choice. Poverty afflicts while asceticism uplifts. A holy person is called to asceticism, but an unlucky person is drawn into poverty. But there are complications of course. Poverty can be willfully self-imposed. Mother Teresa spoke of the spiritual poverty of the West, an emptiness of the soul that luxury fails to fill. Likewise, asceticism can be forced on another: witness the Byzantine iconoclasts of the eighth century who forced image-less worship on their culture.

If the line between poverty and asceticism is blurrier than we might first think, perhaps we might at least agree that it is more difficult to be poor or abstemious than it is rich and epicurean. But again, there are complications. Peter Singer states that “whatever money you're spending on luxuries, not necessities, should be given away,” and does so in an

article that so forcefully calls us out for spending money on luxuries that our restaurant food then tastes like ashes in our mouths, and our smart clothes hang on us like rags.¹ At their most convincing, moralists like Singer and Mother Teresa make poverty, or at least conscientious frugality, positively desirable, the only rational choice for a being who wants to be happy during her waking hours and sleep well at night. At a much more frivolous level, nothing is more fashionable these days than the aesthetic asceticism of minimalism—"lite": the sleek simplicity of Apple products, the no-nonsense swagger of sans serif fonts like Helvetica and its spawn, the renewed vogue of postpunk and conceptual art and spare couture like *Comme des garçons*.

In other words, we can't claim to know anymore whether poverty and asceticism are ours or someone else's or whether they are categorically difficult to endure. Yet this very statement can only come from someone in a privileged position who is able to parse out the finer elements in what billions on Earth must suffer with no choice. One of Argentine folk singer Atahualpa Yupanqui's most well-known songs is "Pobrecito soy," whose refrain laments, "How poor I am! I never say it. It's maybe because of this that I am so poor." Poverty is reinforced through silence, through inertia. And poverty only exists the moment that knowledge of poverty emerges, the moment that comparisons are made and that absence is acknowledged.

Perhaps, then, the only thing we can say with certainty about poverty and asceticism is that our judgments of these states ultimately reflect more about our subject positions than about the states themselves. Poverty is tolerable if we are not poor. Asceticism is noble when we have a choice not to be ascetics.

This issue profiles various attempts, both successful and fraught, to engage the divide between asceticism and opulence, between materialism and poverty. James Harvey-Davitt turns to contemporary Iranian director Jafar Panahi, whose work negates its status as film in order to assert its status as political communiqué. David Janzen similarly analyzes Santiago Sierra's "Line" photographs, which assume certain geometric limitations in exchange for increased aesthetic and political freedoms. Meanwhile, Martin Thomas enriches our understanding of Schopenhauer by means of Beckett's asceticism, a direct engagement with boredom and tragedy. In a short essay for EA's "Reading" section, Mandy-Suzanne Wong examines Giorgio Agamben's recent book *The Highest Poverty*, wondering if aesthetics might find a way to challenge the concept of ownership.

In the unthemed section of the journal, Renata Carmago Sá profiles John Constable's landscape paintings featuring clouds, objects that transcend earthbound nature to hint at a spiritual plane. And Jennifer Stob critiques Nicolas Bourriaud's misreadings of Situationist literature, thereby unfairly undermining its social import.

Notes •

¹ Peter Singer, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," *The New York Times Magazine*, 5 September 1999, 60-64. <http://www.utilitarianism.net/singer/by/19990905.htm>

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Singer, Peter. "The Singer Solution to World Poverty." *The New York Times Magazine*, 5 September 1999, 60-64. Available at <http://www.utilitarianism.net/singer/by/19990905.htm> (Accessed 3 February, 2014).