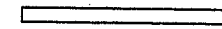


Cigarettes Are Sublime



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this book aims to explore. I therefore look with the greatest attention at those conditions that allow us to reverse Machado's proposition, those moments when it seems, not that life is a cigarette, but that a cigarette is bigger than life. Banville is full of fascinated admiration for the absolutism of the "true smoker," a kind of "dandy" of the cigarette, devoting every waking moment, with great elegance and discipline, all but exclusively to its consumption—smoking, for example, between every spoonful of soup, or even, he says (imagine!), in lieu of making love.

Banville admires the absolute futility of the habit, even though he does not wish to pay its price; but he nevertheless recognizes, in the elevated indifference it promotes, a figure of the highest form of artistic life. It is he, after all, who gave the century the phrase "L'art pour l'art" that Baudelaire, while qualifying it, wields as a weapon against cultural utilitarianism. The tautological self-sufficiency of the formulation, no less than the aesthetic ideology it proclaims, bespeaks the cold and polished surface of the dandy who lives, says Baudelaire, forever in front of a mirror, and whose perfect self-mastery results from an infinitely inward reflection on the self ("Le peintre de la vie moderne," "Le dandy," vol. 2, 709–12). The "true smoker" for Banville belongs to the happy few of the "others" Machado evokes who, savoring their cigarettes, lend to life its aesthetic justification:

Life is a cigarette,
Cinder, ash, and fire,
Some smoke it in a hurry,
Others savor it.

1 What Is a Cigarette?

Only smoking distinguishes humans from
the rest of the animals. —Anonymous



A photographic self-portrait from the 1930s, reproduced in *Le Monde* (December 17, 1987), pictures the popular French photographer Brassai, standing on the rue Saint-Jacques, shooting the streets of Paris at night.¹ Posed against the intermittent shadows of the cobblestones, he is seen in profile, peering through the glass of his bellowed Rolleiflex. The camera is supported at his eye level by a tripod, one foot of which is barely visible in the gutter; the camera could be peering back at him. He wears a long, shadowy overcoat, distinctly well-worn, whose loose folds, like the dark cloth of a portrait camera, completely obscure his body; from beneath a broad fedora emerge, barely, his face and neck, straining to see through the glass. He is hunched against the rawness of one of those cold Paris nights, when the wet wind, sweeping in from the Atlantic uninterrupted by the plains to the west, blows down into the city streets, banishing cobwebs. Half his face is illuminated by the oblique ray of a street lamp that is the apparent but invisible source of the pool of light at his feet. The light, coming from above at an angle, lends a theatrical air to the prominence of his face in the photograph, a face that features a large aquiline nose and, jutting out and down, a cigarette—long, inordinately thick, and very white against the darkness. His craning neck bespeaks his avid wish to see through the lens something that lies improbably beyond the frame in the gloom—something his camera, haloed by light for its role in another photograph, probably could not record. Photographed photographing, he may in fact see nothing in the lens, standing, as he is, beneath the harsh glare whose function is to illuminate him and his camera for us, for the

camera we do not see that gives us to see (in) this self-portrait. Seeming, with the angle of his neck, to form the leg of another tripod, the cigarette may be another index of avidity, sticking out from his lip like a sign of incipient arousal. Not merely a prop, although also that, like everything else in this self-portrait, the cigarette is an index—not a symbol but an entity that is what it is, while at the same time being a sign for the general category of things it is. The index of the cigarette points to itself to indicate that it is an instrument of the photographer's trade. In fact, the cigarette in the photo is a timer for determining, roughly, the long duration of the film's nighttime exposure. Brassai explains: "Une gauloise pour une certaine lumière, une boyard s'il faisait plus sombre" [A Gauloise for a certain light, a Boyard if it was darker]. The Boyard is a cigarette first introduced into commerce in 1896 on the occasion of the visit to Paris of Czar Nicolas II; the word translates as seigneur, or lord, and designates the landed aristocracy of czarist Russia. What matters for Brassai's purposes is that the diameter of the cigarette (10.5 mm for a Boyard versus the normal 8.7 mm for a Gauloise) determines the time it takes to smoke.

This cigarette is not a cigarette but a clock, as every smoker knows intuitively, and as many literary and cinematographic representations attest. It is an intimate counter that the photographer uses to divine the moment when enough light has done its magic on the emulsion. The photographic image takes time to form, but the image we see all at once, in the time of a look, is of a photographer smoking a clock, measuring the time needed to produce this image. Brassai has in fact taken a photograph of the timer that may be timing the exposure, not of the picture he appears in the photo to be taking, but of the one we are observing, the self-portrait taken through the lens of the other camera we do not see. The peculiar and rather amusing centrality that is lent to the photographer's cigarette—a wink at the phallic intrusiveness of the camera's "eye"—is intended therefore to put light on the time of the photograph's exposure to the light and, more particularly, on the difference between the time of the image's production and the instantaneity of its consumption by a look. Every photo seems to represent the snapping off of a single frozen moment, the stereotypical time of a camera's click (or *cliché*, in French), even if, in fact, the exposure took the time it took to smoke a Boyard. No event is ever instantaneous, of course; the punctual unity that seems to define it is always an idealized fiction or a technically persuasive illusion. Frequently the illusion of instantaneity is ideologically motivated by the desire to erase from the appearance of what appears the multiple, heterogeneous labor times that

went into its presentation as a single coherent occurrence. But how can one represent that difference in a photograph—the difference that is constitutive of its production and consumption—except by a little allegory of that difference in the person of the cigarette? It becomes the focus of this photographer's self-portrait. For all its apparent insignificance (the result of the ubiquity and the mechanical stereotyping of cigarettes), it speaks of what the photograph before us occults; it is a kind of hermeneutic hole in the surface of the image that opens onto a dimension of time—the time of its production—which the photograph itself cannot represent but must obscure in the stillness of its image.

One of the ironies of this photographic self-portrait is that its star is not the photographer but the production of the photograph, represented by its timer, a cigarette. The rare importance Brassai lends to the cigarette contrasts with the way cigarettes are usually photographed or painted, depicted or indicated, in prose as well as images, always marginally—propping a gesture, sketching a pose, but rarely the direct focus of attention. The cigarette is usually considered to be merely an accessory to the face of the portrait, to the scene of whatever activity may be being observed. Its role is inessential or nugatory, its utility—if it has any—belongs to the realm of leisure or distraction, its function is decorative and incidental.

The caption in *Le Monde* accompanying the photograph of Brassai is not misled by the modesty of cigarettes. After identifying the brand, it suggests, half seriously, that the subject of the Boyard, like the one Brassai is smoking, "deserves a whole Sorbonne thesis in itself"; after all, *Le Monde* impeccably informs us, the boyard is also the "fat number" [*gros module*] Sartre used to "pop" [*brûler*] when he was writing *Being and Nothingness*. It is not true, as the myth has it, that Sartre wrote his masterpiece sitting in the *Café Flore*, on the Boulevard St. Germain, drinking small cups of coffee and filling ashtrays with innumerable ends of cigarettes, which had hung so long untouched on his Frenchman's lip that nothing remained but the barest butt. But it is true that, while writing, he smoked like a Turk. It will, therefore, be easy to show that any Sorbonne thesis on the Boyard would be bound to contrast the capital role played by cigarettes in the physical writing of Sartre's book with the depreciated value and insignificant functions they are assigned in the moral hierarchies of *Being and Nothingness*. But before getting too deep in anticipation of the putative thesis, the reader must remember that *Le Monde's* suggestion is only half-serious; such a thesis is impossible. Calling Sartre's cigarette a *gros module* in French has burlesque, bordering on obscene, connotations analogous to those in English

surrounding a "fat number," referring to a large, thickly rolled joint. The mechanical impersonality of *module*, like the slangy word *number*, makes it antiphrastic, intimating the opposite of what it designates—the least indifferently, the most highly personal component of pleasure and taste the cigarette affords ("Who is that cute number?"). The joke of proposing that the fat number Sartre used to pop become the object of a Sorbonne thesis points up the inherent futility, the irredeemable triviality of cigarettes, all-too-ironically "worthy," like so many academic subjects, of being treated, out of all proportion to their actual value or significance, with the misplaced gravity of a weighty academic tome. Only a fool or an academic would undertake to write a thesis on the Boyard—to write a book on cigarettes!

But imagine for a moment that you were both an academic and a fool, like the author, and you took seriously *Le Monde's* suggestion. For a moment, try to imagine the shape of such a thesis. It would doubtless present some very peculiar anomalies. In the first place, the cigarette does not lend itself to the sort of Aristotelian definitions with which every Sorbonne thesis inaugurates its investigation. One has difficulty asking the question, the Aristotelian philosophical question, "Ti estin [What is] a cigarette?" The cigarette seems, by nature, to be so ancillary, so insignificant and inessential, so trifling and disparaged, that it hardly has any proper identity or nature, any function or role of its own—it is at most a vanishing being, one least likely to acquire the status of a cultural artifact, of a poised, positioned thing in the world, deserving of being interrogated, philosophically, as to its being. The cigarette not only has little being of its own, it is hardly ever singular, rather always myriad, multiple, proliferating. Every single cigarette numerically implies all the other cigarettes, exactly alike, that the smoker consumes in series; each cigarette immediately calls forth its inevitable successor and rejoins the preceding one in a chain of smoking more fervently forged than that of any other form of tobacco.

Cigarettes, in fact, may never be what they appear to be, may always have their identity and their function elsewhere than where they appear—always requiring interpretation. In that respect they are like all signs, whose intelligible meanings are elsewhere than their sensible, material embodiment: the path through the forest is signaled by the cross on the tree. Cigarettes are frequently signs, but especially ambiguous ones, difficult to read. The difficulty is linked to the multiplicity of meanings and intentions that cigarettes bespeak and betray; they speak in volumes, rather than in brief emblematic legends. The cigarette is itself a volume, a book or scroll

that unfolds its multiple, heterogeneous, disparate associations around the central, governing line of a generally murderous intrigue. The cigarette is a thyrsus, the wand of Dionysus, which Baudelaire took to be the emblem of all poetic language, whose vine leaves are the poet's fantasy and invention swirling around a rigid, central hop-pole that stands for poetic intention and creative purpose. Smoking there at the end of two delicately poised fingers or emerging from its pack at the end of an offer to smoke, the cigarette may convey worlds of meaning that no thesis could begin to unpack, that require armies of novelists, moviemakers, songwriters, and poets to evoke.

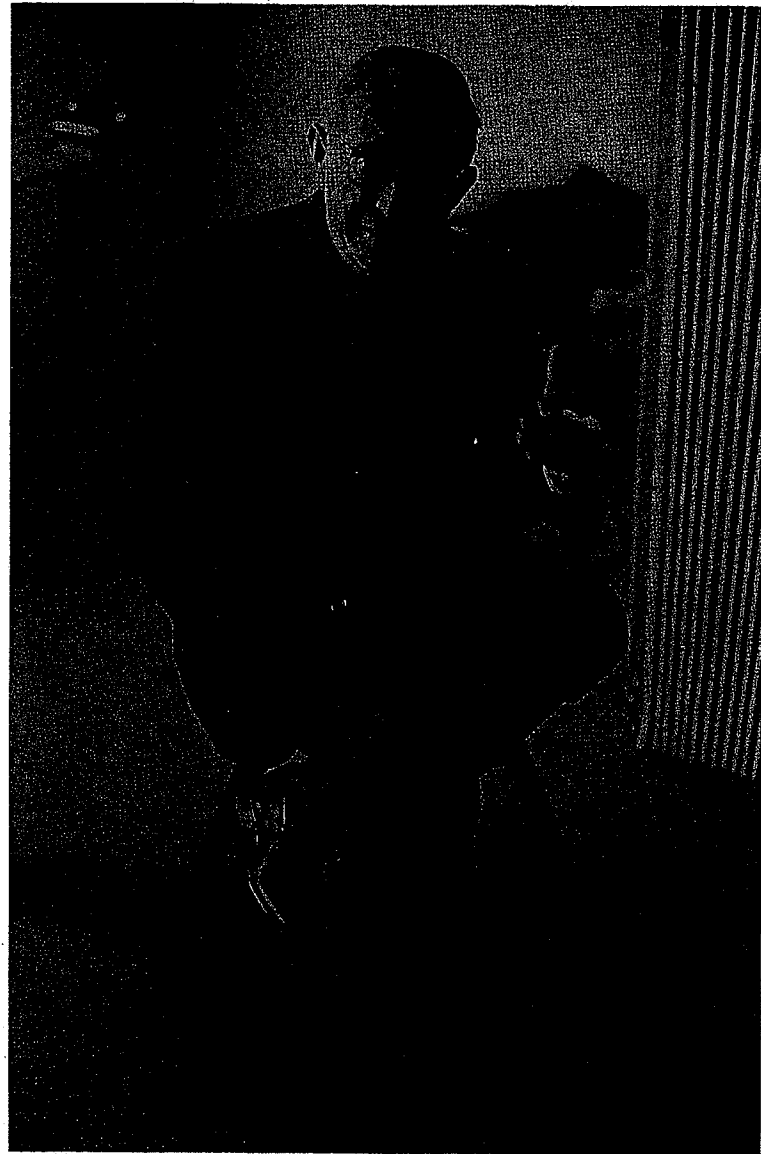
There are other, more contingent reasons why Aristotle could not ask, "What is a cigarette?" Tobacco was unknown to antiquity, and not even Aristotle, who knew every damn plant, knew anything about it, botanically or experientially. But a more subtle ignorance may be involved here: Aristotle did not know the experience of tobacco, which, to some, may be equivalent to saying that he, an ancient, was uninformed about modernity. The introduction of tobacco into Europe in the sixteenth century corresponded with the arrival of the Age of Anxiety, the beginning of modern consciousness that accompanied the invention and universalization of printed books, the discovery of the New World, the development of rational, scientific methods, and the concurrent loss of medieval theological assurances. The Age of Anxiety gave itself an incomparable and probably indispensable remedy in the form of tobacco; it was an antidote brought by Columbus from the New World against the anxiety that his discoveries occasioned in the Eurocentric consciousness of Western culture, confronted by the unsuspected countenance of a great unknown world contiguous with its own.² The paradoxical experience of smoking tobacco, with its contradictory physical effects, its poisonous taste and unpleasant pleasure, was enthusiastically taken up by modernity as a drug for easing the anxiety arising from the shock of successive assaults on old certainties and the prospect of greater unknowns. It is tempting to think that Aristotle could not have known tobacco even if he knew it. Tobacco, the avid enjoyment of which quickly spread to every corner of the Continent and promptly beyond to Asia, defines modernity; its use is an index of whatever revolution in consciousness may have occurred to transform the culture and the mores, the ethics and principles, of antiquity. Aristotle could not define the cigarette because, resisting the Aristotelian definition, the cigarette defines him and his age: the cigarette asks Aristotle, "What's this, the question: 'What is?'" Such an argument was advanced by Pierre Louÿs, the

French classicist and pornographer, in a short story written in 1896, "Une volupté nouvelle." Cigarettes, he suggests through his heroine Callistô, are the only new pleasure that modern man has invented in eighteen hundred years; and perhaps his sole originality with respect not only to the pleasures but to the wisdom of antiquity. For Louÿs they thus define the difference between modern man and antiquity and therefore become the most important thing to study; the one most worthy to occupy the attention of the historian of culture. History, in fact, should be nothing else, in a way, than the history of cigarettes.

However impossible it may be to ask the Aristotelian question of the cigarette, we cannot pretend to ignore that the question "Qu'est-ce que la Cigarette?" has already literally been asked, in French, in an essay written at the end of the nineteenth century by Théodore de Banville. For the moment we will put off consideration of the answer he proposes and assume that the question cannot be asked at all.

We can be certain, however, that no thesis could fail to include a chapter titled "Le Boyard in *L'être et le néant*." It would not only narrate what could be learned of Sartre's smoking habits, which were compulsive (Simone de Beauvoir, for example, attests that "he smoked two packs of Boyards a day" [8]), but it would contrast the importance of the role cigarettes played in the material production of the work with the insignificance they are implicitly assigned within it, whenever they serve as an exemplary, thematically explicit topic of philosophical reflection. For Sartre makes frequent reference in those pages to smoking. It is one of the charms of *L'être et le néant* [Being and nothingness] that its abstract formulations are illustrated with an abundance of concrete examples drawn from the writer's immediate surroundings—examples whose deictic formulations, such as "this inkwell," "this table," "these cigarettes," recall the style of Descartes's *Meditations* much more than, say, Heidegger's austere and rarely illustrated *Sein und Zeit*, to which Sartre constantly refers. It is instructive to contrast Sartre's constant cigarette smoking while writing *L'être et le néant* with his systematic devaluation of them in the work itself, particularly compared to his beloved pipe. Among the many references to cigarettes (but no cigars: wrong class) and pipes (to which we may assimilate the examples of matches and tobacco pouches), the latter are assigned to the side of Being while cigarettes belong to Nothingness.

What is a cigarette, philosophically speaking? A Sorbonne thesis such as the one *Le Monde* proposes might have less difficulty addressing the narrower question: "What exactly is a Boyard?" It would perforce begin by



Jean-Paul Sartre

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noting the circumstances surrounding the Boyard's introduction to France in 1896 on the occasion of an official visit to Paris of the ill-fated Czar Nicolas II, a heavy smoker whose habit was not what killed him. The name Boyard was chosen no doubt to honor the imperial guest, but it resembles many other names of cigarettes intended to lend an air of aristocratic luxury to the most democratic, popular form of tobacco; the putative thesis would not likely miss the irony that the cigarette named for the czar was adopted by the proletarian class that in Russia overthrew him.

Cigarettes first appear in *L'être et le néant* when Sartre wants to exemplify the existence of attributes that are objective properties of things but not inherent in them. He writes: "If I count the cigarettes in this cigarette case, I have the impression that I am uncovering an objective property of this group of cigarettes: they are twelve. This property appears to my consciousness as a property existing in the world. . . . an excellent refutation of Alain's formula: 'To know is to know one knows.' And yet, at the moment in which these cigarettes are revealed to me as being twelve, I have a non-thetic consciousness of my act of addition" (19). Sartre at this moment is distinguishing between reflexive consciousness and immediate consciousness of things. The former consists in judgments that consciousness passes on itself and therefore implies the "thetic" positioning of consciousness by itself—explicitly, nominally, self-reflexively posing itself as its own object, knowing that it knows. Immediate consciousness, perception or counting, attributes objective properties to things (the number twelve to cigarettes, for example) without posing its operation as an object of consciousness: one may count without knowing that one counts, or how. One can know, contrary to Alain, without knowing that one knows. What is of interest here is the way cigarettes lend themselves to the illustration of this philosophical distinction. It is not that "these cigarettes" actually themselves possess the "objective property" of being twelve; they only appear to do so at the moment they are counted. Nevertheless, they lend themselves better to this appearance than other things might (pipes or tobacco pouches, for example) by virtue of their eminent countability.

The distinctive character of cigarettes compared to other forms of tobacco is their indistinctness; one cannot distinguish one smoke from another. Each cigarette is exactly, mechanically, indifferently like every previous cigarette one has smoked, perhaps hundreds of thousands of them. Each individual cigarette has its identity insofar as it is like every other one, mere interchangeable tokens. There is no existential, Kierkegaardian uniqueness in the individual cigarette, only an abstract Hegelian generality

under which every individual is subsumed. Deprived of any irreducible specificity or distinguishing characteristics, the cigarette has only a collective identity, not an individual one. The one is the many; number seems to belong to its identity. In that respect cigarettes are radically different from, say, a pipe, whose value is a direct function of its "character," the accidental or crafted features that lend it the aura of an irreplaceable object—uniquely itself. Neither are tobacco pouches easy to count; their function is rather to hold what is countable, frequently a form of money, with a calculable value. Like the prior material condition of counting, they keep together whatever lends itself to receiving the objective attributes of number—money or smokes. That is why a tobacco pouch is called, in French, *une bourse*.

A cigarette lends itself much less readily, by contrast, to the self-asserting appropriation that for Sartre, following Hegel (cf. chapter 4 of *The Phenomenology of the Mind*), is the motive for the ownership of things. Sartre writes, for example: "Thus, to the extent that I appear to myself as creating objects simply by virtue of appropriation, these objects are me. The pen and the pipe, the clothing, the desk, the house, is me. The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have" (652). Cigarettes cannot be Sartrean objects of appropriation; rather, they are abstract, unindividuated entities that can be offered and accepted indiscriminately. Having few qualitative determinations, they frustrate efforts to foster the illusion of being a kind of surrogate self, an exteriorization of one's most intimate identity. But to whom does one offer a pipe? If I am what I have, since I have nothing so completely as my pipe, *la pipe, c'est moi*. One would never dream of asserting "I am my cigarette" unless one were seized by a Mallarméan rage to vanish.

Of course, Sartre's ethical aim is to discredit this bourgeois conception of property, whose whole ideology is based on the premise that I am what I have. But even if, as he argues, the pipe resists appropriation, having been smoked, it nevertheless remains, before me on the table, a substantial, independent, palpable object—very different from the cigarette, whose destiny is to disappear in consummation. Sartre writes: "The pipe is there, on the table, independent, indifferent. I take it in my hands, I feel it, I contemplate it, in order to achieve this appropriation; but precisely because these gestures are destined to give me the enjoyment [*jouissance*] of this appropriation, they misfire, I have nothing but a piece of inert wood between my fingers" (652). The pipe seduces its owner with the illusion that it can be appropriated by virtue of its palpable presence; but the more I manipu-

late it in view of enjoying its possession, imagining it to be an extension of myself, the more surely those gestures misfire. The bloody thing, for example, keeps going out, shattering the illusion that it can perfectly fulfill my appropriative desire; it remains there, in itself, independent, an inert piece of wood.

Mallarmé seems to make the same distinction between cigarettes and pipes in a remarkable passage in which they are distributed—like the two great poems on which he worked for most of his adult life, “L’après-midi d’un faune” and “Hérodiade”—between summer and winter activities:

Hier j’ai trouvé ma pipe en rêvant une longue soirée de beau travail d’hiver. Jetées les cigarettes avec toutes les joies enfantines de l’été dans le passé qu’illuminent les feuilles bleues de soleil, les mousselines et reprise ma grave pipe par un homme sérieux qui veut fumer longtemps sans se déranger, afin de mieux travailler. (275)

Yesterday I found my pipe while dreaming a long evening of work, of beautiful winter work. Discarded were cigarettes with all the childlike joys of summer in the past illuminated by the blue leaves of sun, flimsy veils [mousselines], and taken up was my grave pipe by a serious man who wants to smoke a long time, without being disturbed, in order better to work.

Smoking cigarettes engenders the gauzy pleasure of ephemera; it promotes the dissolving of the I, the movement of depersonalization that is the condition of the Mallarméan poetic experience. Conversely, the pipe accompanies the labor of the negative, dreams of a more heroic sort, like the grave undertaking of pure poetry: Mallarmé at “beautiful winter work.” Pipes are adult, serious, grave, while cigarettes are childish, irresponsible, flimsy veils.

Whenever Sartre speaks about cigarettes, it is never as things-in-themselves, but always as things traversed toward something other than themselves; fleeting, they are always signs or mediators for something else that unveils itself in the moment they vanish: “It is only in lighting this cigarette that I discover my concrete possibility or, if one prefers, my desire to smoke” (72). Precisely because the cigarette resists the illusion that it can be appropriated through smoking, that its mere enjoyment can lend substantial being to the nothingness of the self’s radical freedom, the bourgeois smoker invents a more ingenious strategy to possess it. Artistic creation, doubling enjoyment, adds a more refined means of appropri-

tion to the process by which one makes the cigarette into “my cigarette.” Sartre writes: “Thus, those who prefer to surround themselves with objects of daily use that they have created themselves have more refined ways of appropriation. They unite, in a single object, in a simultaneous moment, appropriation through enjoyment and appropriation through creation. We everywhere find the same projected unity, from the case of artistic creation to that of the cigarette, which is supposed to be ‘better when you roll it yourself’” (638). For Sartre, the idea that a cigarette tastes better when you roll it yourself has nothing to do with any intrinsic quality of the object; rather, it has to do with the appropriative-creative act that produces it. Its taste lies more in my hands than on my tongue.

Curiously, in *L’être et le néant*, the match appears to fall somewhere between a cigarette and a pipe, insofar as its ontological status is concerned. Like the pipe, it offers the resistance of a dense piece of matter, but like the cigarette its being is exterior to itself, other than what it is when it lies on the table before me:

The same can be said for this piece of wood, for this match which is what it is, but whose meaning as a match is exterior to it, which certainly can ignite, but which, for the moment is just a piece of wood with a black head. The potentiality inherent in this, while rigorously connected to it, appears as belonging to the thing itself in a state of entire indifference to its being. . . . To conceive the match as a piece of white wood with a black head, is not to strip it of all potentiality but simply to give it new ones (a new permanence—a new essence). (237)

Like the cigarette, the match’s essence is exterior to itself in a state that is different from its form as a little piece of white wood with a black head. The way Sartre repeats the formula, “little piece of white wood with a black head” [*bout de bois blanc avec une tête noire*], lends to the match the substantial, repeatable identity of matter itself (in Greek, the word for matter is *hylé*, which means “wood”). But the catachresis of the match “head” prosopopoeically turns the little white piece of wood into a tiny surrogate for Sartre himself, whose mode of being, like that of the match propped against his cups, is never limited to what it appears to be. Like the match, Sartre at every moment enjoys the possibility of being other than what he may seem, leaning there on the table at the Café Flore. The tranquil scribbler, gazing myopically across the Boulevard St. Germain in the direction of Lipp, is permanently endowed with the existential freedom to project

himself into a situation other than the one in which he presently abides—to burst, for example, into radical flame when the time for revolutionary action has come.

The denigrated ontological status of cigarettes, when compared with the pipe, corresponds to their ethical position within other binary oppositions that are central to Sartre's existential morality. Cigarette smoking, for example, proposes itself to Sartre in the course of an important philosophical argument concerning the difference between an authentic and an inauthentic act: "It is in fact appropriate to note first that an act is in principle intentional. The clumsy smoker who, by inadvertence, exploded a powder dump has not acted. Conversely, the worker assigned to dynamite a quarry and who obeyed his given orders acted when he provoked the expected explosion: he intentionally accomplished a conscious project" (487).

This illustration appears at the beginning of the fourth section of *L'être et le néant*, in the crucial chapter on the concept of freedom and the act. Even though the throwaway gesture of the cigarette smoker might have political or military consequences more important than that of the bomb thrower, the latter, unlike the former, accomplishes an act, according to Sartre, because the gesture of dynamiting comprises an intention, an enactment, and a result that is in some appropriate relation to the intention. Tossing a cigarette, however explosive its result, is not an act, properly speaking in existential terms; its consequence has no relation to the presumed intention that surrounded its enactment. No choice, no freedom was entailed in its performance; its consequences were determined purely by chance.

Sartre's attachment to these brief, seemingly casual philosophical examples is demonstrated dramatically in a crucial scene in his play *Les mains sales*, written not long after *L'être et le néant*. In the "Second tableau, first scene," the (anti)hero Hugo is seen sitting at a typewriter composing the Communist party newspaper. The noise of the machine disturbs Ivan, who is waiting to leave on a clandestine mission; he has been ordered by the party to blow up a bridge. "What's your name?" he asks Hugo. "Raskolnikoff," comes the reply, "he's a character in a novel." Hugo, smoking, expresses his sense of impotence at having to serve the party in the passive role of journalist-writer. Ivan tries to assure him that writing well for the party newspaper is also a form of action. For most of the play, Hugo remains unconvinced. Philosophically, Hugo is the cigarette thrower, or thinks he is, and Ivan is the worker taking orders to blow up the bridge; one is an authentic actor (in a play on a stage where no act is authentic) and the other is not.

Smoking a cigarette is usually considered doing nothing; it is not usually defined as an act. It is an activity—a gesture—that may accompany action but cannot be considered to be action. It has no utility, like eating or sleeping; it either belongs to leisure, a time that is out of the time of work, or at best may be a supplementary accompaniment to work. And yet one has to wonder how many drags on his Boyard Sartre was obliged to take before he finished sketching out this description of the man smoking and committing—what? a non-act, like blowing up an arsenal by mistake or writing a book of philosophy. The philosopher's example, like most stereotypical representations of the cigarette, systematically discounts its usefulness, even if, as here, it may have played a determining role in the production of the very philosophical discourse that predicates its inessentiality.

The connection between smoking and writing will come up throughout these pages. Like writing, smoking belongs to that category of action that falls in between the states of activity and passivity—a somewhat embarrassed, embarrassing condition, unclear, unproductive, a mere gesture. The distinction between an authentic and an inauthentic act seems to have, for Sartre, its equivalent in the distinction he makes between two kinds of language: the language of prose, which represents reality—interior or exterior—and the language of poetry, which refers only to itself. In *Situations I*, in the essay "Qu'est-ce que la littérature," that distinction underlies a fundamental ethical, political difference between prose and poetry that closely corresponds to the distinction in *L'être et le néant* between an act that transparently translates an intention into an appropriate result and one that is a gratuitous gesture, neither motivated nor consequential, self-contained, opaque to any significance. The distinction between the two kinds of writing corresponds in Sartre to the difference between the political and the aesthetic. Smoking a cigarette is closer to writing poetry than writing prose; writing prose is more like a conscious act of terrorism than smoking and tossing a cigarette—even if the consequences of the latter may, unintentionally, be explosive. But what about *L'être et le néant*, Sartre's own philosophical writing? Does it more closely approximate Hugo's journalism or the act of taking an order and blowing up a bridge? It is hard not to think that writing philosophy, like smoking cigarettes, lies somewhere between action and nonaction, between the activity of doing something and the futility of a beautiful *far niente*.

The strongest justification for taking Sartre's Boyard as a crucial element in the elaboration of his existentialist philosophy may be found in an extraordinary page, toward the end of the tome, in which Sartre, un-

characteristically, makes an explicit reference to his own biography. Like many biographies of smokers, it tells the story of a successful attempt to stop. And like many stories of success, the happy ending leaves unspoken tobacco's eventual revenge. Sartre's serene account of his philosophical triumph over cigarettes is belied, in reality, by the brevity of that triumph; he continued to smoke for the next forty years—an outcome that should make us view his philosophical conclusions with some skepticism. The significance here of this lengthy passage warrants quoting it in its entirety:

Each object possessed, raised up against the background of the world, manifests the entire world, the way a beloved woman [for Stendhal] manifests the sky, the beach, the sea that surrounded her when she appeared. To appropriate this object to oneself is thus to appropriate the world, symbolically. Each person can recognize it with reference to his own experience; in my case I will cite a personal experience, not to prove anything but to guide the reader's inquiry.

A few years ago, I was led to decide to stop smoking. The beginning was rough, and in truth, I did not so much care for the taste of tobacco that I was going to lose, as for the meaning [*le sens*] of the act of smoking. A whole crystallization had taken place. I used to smoke at performances, mornings at work, evenings after dinner, and it seemed to me that in ceasing to smoke I was going to subtract some of the interest of the performance, some of the evening dinner's savor, some of the fresh vivacity of the morning's work. Whatever unexpected event might have struck my eyes, it seemed to me that it was fundamentally impoverished as soon as I could no longer welcome it by smoking. To-be-susceptible-to-be-encountered-by-me-while-smoking: that was the concrete quality that had been universally spread over things. And it seemed to me that I was going to tear it away from them and that, in the midst of this universal impoverishment, life was a little less worth living. However, smoking is an appropriative destructive reaction. Tobacco is a symbolically "appropriated" being, since it is destroyed following the rhythm of my breath by a manner of "continuous destruction," since it passes in me and its changing into myself manifests itself symbolically by the transformation of the consumed solid into smoke. The bond (*liaison*) between the landscape seen while smoking and this little crematorial sacrifice was such, as we have just seen, that the latter was like a symbol of the former. It therefore signifies that the destructive appropriative action of tobacco was symbolically equiva-

lent to an appropriative destruction of the entire world. Through the tobacco I was smoking it was the world that was burning, that was being smoked, that reabsorbed itself in steam to reenter in me. To maintain my decision to stop, I had to achieve a sort of decrystallization—that is, without exactly realizing it, I reduced tobacco to being only itself: a leaf that burns; I cut the symbolic links with the world, I persuaded myself that I would take nothing away from the theater, from the landscape, from the book I was reading, if I considered them without my pipe; that is, it finally came down to my having other modes of possessing these objects than that sacrificial ceremony. As soon as I was persuaded of it, my regret was reduced to insignificance: I deplored not having to smell the odor of the smoke, the warmth of the little heater between my fingers, etc. But suddenly my regret was disarmed and quite bearable. (657)

The story Sartre tells is intended not to "prove" anything, he says, merely "to guide the reader's inquiry." The personal reflections are offered as a gently guided interlude in the inexorable march of argument, as if the philosopher, for a moment on vacation, had taken time out for a smoke; one may be permitted to suspect that the leisurely narrative conceals the force of the rhetorical pressure he means to apply to the reader's reluctant assent.

It is not just for Sartre, ever the philosopher, that smoking is motivated less by its taste than by its "meaning"; probably no one ever smokes cigarettes just for the taste of them. But the meaning he attributes to them is philosophical, goes to the heart of his political philosophy. Even though cigarettes are the least easily appropriated objects in the world (one has the greatest difficulty saying "my cigarette"), smoking them reveals the essence of appropriation—displays, in its most abstract form, the motive behind all desire to possess something, to own at all. For with cigarettes we do not appropriate the thing in itself but everything that it "crystallizes" for us. Sartre borrows the idea of crystallization from Stendhal's treatise *De l'amour*, and applies to every form of possession what Stendhal described only for the case of love. For Sartre, modifying and extending Stendhal's insight, "Each object possessed, raised up against the background of the world, manifests the entire world, the way a beloved woman [for Stendhal] manifests the sky, the beach, the sea that surrounded her when she appeared. To appropriate this object to oneself is thus to appropriate the world, symbolically" (657).

The cigarette, for Sartre, is an even more powerful instrument of crystal-

lization, because it allows us, in a symbolic act, to take into ourselves the world around us, the whole landscape that smoking a cigarette accompanies. When we light up at a performance or a dinner, or at the sight of any new or unfamiliar experience, we perform an act of projection/identification/interiorization whose movement corresponds to the physical process of lighting up, drawing deeply, exhaling slowly into the space around. Sartre calls this act of appropriation, which makes the world mine, an "appropriative destructive reaction." We appropriate the world by "reducing" it to flame and smoke and ash, to the merest air we take into our lungs. We appropriate the world around us by destroying it, symbolically, in the same way that potlatch, the Kwakiutl Indian ceremony of tribal giving, consists in burning great quantities of the merchandise that is offered by one tribe as a "gift" to the other. Tobacco, says Sartre, is "the symbol of the appropriated object" because, as it is smoked, the solid thing is gradually turned into smoke which enters my body. Smoking mimes the desired transformation of an object into myself through an act of appropriative possession; the object becomes "mine" by a process of "continuous destruction," "the transformation of the consumed solid into smoke," whereby it passes into me and becomes (part of) myself. Smoking a cigarette is therefore a "sacrificial ceremony" in which the disappearance of something solid, tobacco, is infinitely compensated by the symbolic gain I acquire in appropriating to myself the world around me. To give up smoking, therefore, effects an impoverishment of the world and of the self one is naturally reluctant to tolerate. Life without cigarettes is not worth living.

The motive of appropriation, says Sartre, is never simply the desire to possess an object; one desires through that possession to possess the self as (if it were) an object. The thing we aim to possess or appropriate is a "concrete representative" of "l'être en-soi" (being-in-itself), which we wish to appropriate as the foundation and guarantee of our own being. The appropriated object never has value only in itself, for its individual qualities or uses—every singular thing also has "indefinite prolongations," insofar as it not only belongs to a general class of things but also symbolically represents our wish to ground our being with the stability and positivity that ontologically attach to things in themselves. Appropriation through crystallization is the paradigm that proves the aim of all appropriation and possession. It is, for Sartre, the mode in which we normally flee the implications of our radical freedom, the negativity in the possibility that belongs to us, the possibility of not being, of becoming other than what we are. All forms of appropriation, of making mine, aim to give the

self the ontological stability and foundational positivity that we attribute to what Sartre, following Hegel, calls the *en-soi*: the thing insofar as it exists in itself, permanently identical to itself. For existentialism, the self has its authentic mode of existence in the possibility of its being *pour-soi*, of being able to project itself beyond what it is in any present moment, toward possibilities that reduce the present to insignificance, or nonbeing, what Sartre calls nothingness, *néant*.

Sartre claims to have found it easy to stop smoking once he "decrytallized" the experience—that is, once he found other ways of taking possession of the significant events in his daily life: the savor of a dinner, the pleasure of a performance, the act of early morning writing. He does not imply that he, or anyone, can renounce the appropriative desire that cigarette smoking so emblematically expresses, merely that he found other means to make symbolic appropriations. He no longer required the sacrificial ceremony of "grilling" a cigarette, as one says in French. Once he was "persuaded" that he did not require that particular mode of appropriation, he had no problem, he says, mastering the pain of missing the smell of smoke, the warmth of holding fire in his hand, "etc." The "etcetera" includes all the unstated insignificant charms of smoking that must have had some importance for Sartre, because he shortly took up smoking again, with a vengeance. Even at the end of his life, suffering from "grave disturbances in the circulation in the left hemisphere of his brain (the hemisphere that has to do with speech) and a narrowing of the blood vessels" (9), Sartre, defying his doctors' orders, "obstinately drank and smoked and we were horrified" (42), writes Simone de Beauvoir; "He found it difficult to hold a cigarette" (18), "his cigarette kept dropping from his lips" (18), the doctors "prescribed a powerful tension reducer and Valium to help him smoke less" (90), but "in spite of all this, he said, with an obstinate look, that he was going to go back to smoking" (90). One evening, in Montparnasse, on his way back from a Brazilian restaurant, his legs gave way and he nearly fell. In the hospital, the doctor spoke to him forcibly:

Sartre could save his legs only by giving up tobacco. If he did not smoke anymore, his state could be much improved and he could be assured of a quiet old age and a normal death. Otherwise his toes would have to be cut off, then his feet, and then his legs. Sartre seemed impressed. Liliane and I took him home without too much difficulty. As for tobacco, he said he wanted to think it over. . . .

We spent the evening reading and talking. He had made up his mind.

to stop smoking the next day, Monday. I said, "Doesn't it make you sad to think you're smoking your last cigarette?" "No. To tell you the truth I find them rather disgusting now." (101-2)

Not altogether disgusting, for a little later he went back to smoking heavily. The reason for his persistent recidivism may be found, perhaps, in an interview he gave that year for the European edition of *Newsweek*. Asked, "What is the most important thing in your life at present?" he replied, "I don't know. Everything. Living. Smoking"; de Beauvoir translates, ignoring smoking: "He was fully conscious of the beauty of this blue and golden fall, and he rejoiced in it" (92). Against the philosopher's power of intellectual "persuasion," and despite the most imperious claims of health, the charms of smoking, the evocativeness of its perfumed smoke, the Promethean heat of its controlled flame, and its "etcetera" work their magic, seducing him back to performing the familiar sacrificial ceremony with his usual compulsive enthusiasm. De Beauvoir's translation of Sartre's response to the interviewer, evoking the beauty of the fall, lets us think that the "etcetera" must also include what Sartre alludes to implicitly in his reading of Stendhal ("the way a beloved woman manifests the sky, the beach, the sea that surrounded her when she appeared")—the whole realm of the aesthetic that has little place in the philosophy of freedom and in the imperatives to action that existentialism wishes to locate at the essence of life.

The founder and most distinguished exponent of the Parnassian school of "l'art pour l'art," Théodore de Banville, who was much admired by Baudelaire, wrote a piece on cigarettes at the end of his long life that begins with this paradoxical reflection: "There cannot be any longer—and in a short time there will no longer be at all—any cigarette smokers" (233). Banville's prophecy, made on the verge of the moment when James B. Duke, in 1895, put the Bonsak machine to work producing billions of cigarettes sold around the world, was instantly and colossally refuted. But he was not mistaken, if one grants him the right to his distinction between "les vrais fumeurs de cigarettes" and the others. "But what are the conditions," he asks, "that need to be joined to make a real smoker of cigarettes?" (235). Before he can answer that question, he feels an Aristotelian compulsion to define the thing itself: "D'abord et avant tout, car il faut définir, qu'est-ce que la Cigarette?" [First and foremost, because it must be defined, what is a cigarette?]; the answer comes immediately, all too succinctly: "It is a pinch of tobacco, rolled in a little leaf of tissue paper [*papier de fil*]" (235-36).

If a cigarette is defined as tobacco rolled into a leaf of something other than itself, its origins can be traced, as we have seen in the passage from Bartholomé de Las Casas, to the earliest moment of tobacco's introduction into the West, and beyond that to pre-Columbian practices. But if we take a narrower view, we must agree with Ned Rival, who wrote: "Tout le chic de la cigarette tient alors dans le papier" [The whole chic of the cigarette resides in the paper] (171). It would then appear that the cigarette arrived first in Spain, where it was introduced by Brazilians, according to Rival, sometime around the years 1825-30 (Rival 170-71). The Crimean War played the same role in popularizing cigarettes as the Thirty Years' War did in spreading tobacco throughout Europe: French soldiers encountered cigarettes for the first time when fighting Turks in the 1850s, and, with the enthusiasm that soldiers ever since have shown, took them up and brought them back to their admiring compatriots.

Cigarettes had an earlier, brief moment of vogue in 1843 when King Louis Philippe and his queen, Marie-Amélie, ordered the vicomte Siméon, head of the Régie, the royal tobacco monopoly, to manufacture twenty thousand gold-tipped cigarettes, rolled in lithographed paper, made up in packs of ten, to be sold at auction for sixty gold francs to benefit the survivors of the hurricane in Guadeloupe (Rival 173). Thereafter production in France fell off, before resuming abundantly in the revolutionary year 1848. It cannot be an accident that cigarette smoking always finds propitious conditions in times of political crisis or social stress. It was not, however, until the Second Empire that Louis Napoleon, a compulsive user of all kinds of tobacco, and a fifty-cigarettes-a-day man, legitimized their use by the aristocracy. James B. Duke and his machine made them democratic.

Rival's remark about the chic of paper and the hint provided by the mention of "*papier lithographié*" recall that smoking a cigarette has always meant, as well, sending up in smoke what has been printed—words or images, pressed or inked on the paper; the cigarette itself is stamped, stereotyped, printed out mechanically. The earliest attempts to mechanize the production of cigarettes, at first on an individual scale, gave rise to the little cigarette-rolling machines that were called "cigaretotypes," as if making a cigarette were understood from the first to be equivalent to pressing or printing one. In *Tras los montes*, Gautier, after describing the Spanish rolling a "*papelito*" between thumb and index finger yellowed by tobacco, adds: "A propos de papel español para cigaritas, notons en passant que je n'en ai pas vu encore un seul cahier: les naturels du pays se servent de papier à lettre ordinaire coupé en petits morceaux; ces cahiers teintés de réglisse,

bariolés de dessins grotesques et historiés de *letrillas* ou de romances bouffonnes sont expédiés en France aux amateurs d'exotisme" [With respect to *papel español para cigarrillas*, let us note in passing that I have not seen here a single little packet: the native inhabitants used ordinary letter-writing paper cut up into little pieces; those packets flavored with licorice, wildly colored with drawings and covered with *letrillas* or funny stories, are expedited to France to lovers of exoticism] (quoted in Rival 171). Not only sparse words, like those written on packaged cigarettes, but whole little fictions dreamily vanish in air as the paper, tinted with licorice, wildly colored, and thick with writing, vanishes into smoke. Consuming cigarettes meant at the origin consuming romances, burning up in perfumed smoke the words of dreams and fictions.

As one might expect, Banville's definition is only the beginning of the frame he draws around an object not easily encompassed; for cigarettes, defining only begins to tell the story. "It is a pinch of tobacco, rolled in a little leaf of tissue paper. But once the tobacco has been placed and distributed equally, the leaf must be rolled elegantly, rapidly, with a rhythmic harmony, with a rapid, confident gesture" (Banville 235-36).

It is already clear that for Banville, the cigarette is not only a product but a production—a little work of art. Its existence depends on the exercise of a minor craft, whose technique is choreographed as rigorously as a ballet, whose charm depends on qualities of poise, harmony, elegance, rapidity, and confidence of gesture. Nor is that all—only the beginning of the cigarette's production, enactment. Banville continues: "That finished, has the cigarette been made? Not at all, for its shape must never be fixed and defined; ceaselessly remolded, rolled again, according to the particular genius of whoever is smoking it, it remains varied, diverse, impressionable, sensitive, living; isn't that enough to prove how inartistic it is to smoke packaged cigarettes, mechanically made?" (237).

The cigarette, between the fingers of the artistic smoker, becomes a living, sensitive creature, brought to sentience the way the mute opacity of marble comes to life beneath the sculptor's tools. The cigarette acquires an existence all its own, an irreducible particularity that reflects the "genius" of the one who made it, but that seems no longer to require the creator to sustain its being in the world as an independent, living creature. Hence, to smoke cigarettes rolled in advance, by machines yet, contradicts the artistic vocation to which "real smokers" consecrate themselves with a devotion and fervor resembling those of a priest or a soldier.

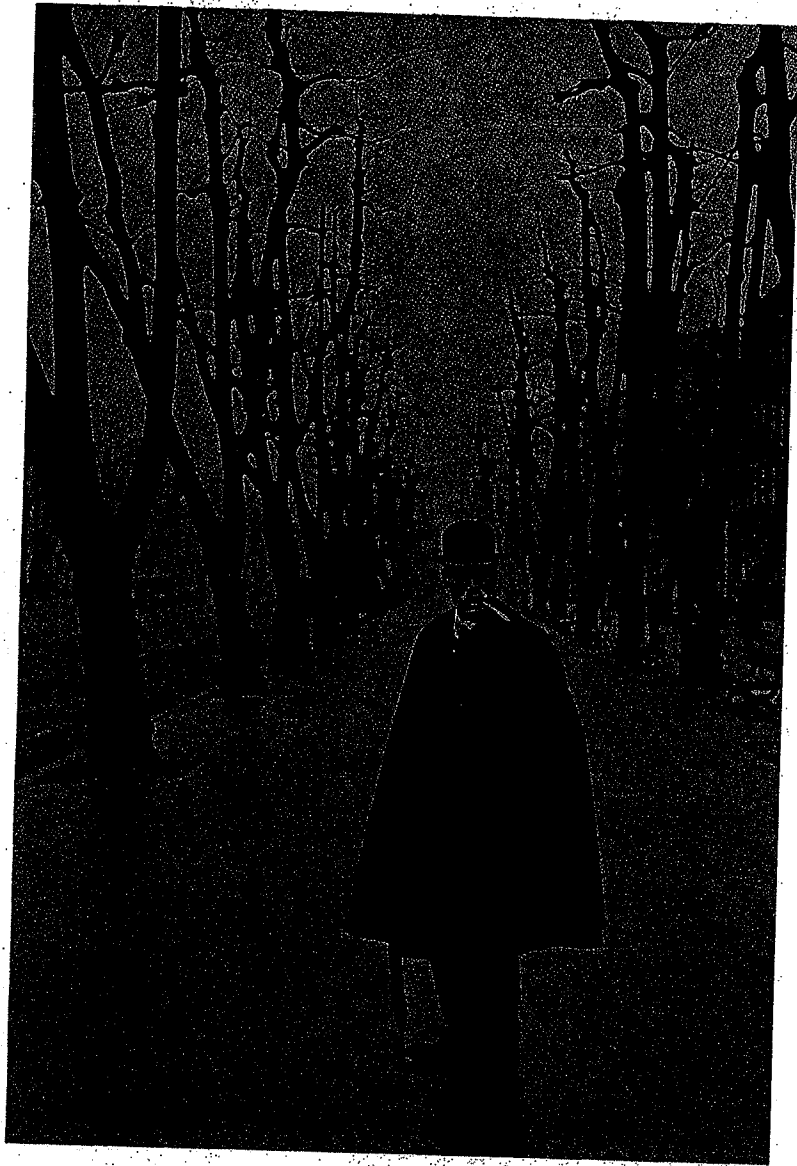
The figure in the nineteenth century who brings together the most in-

tense spiritual concentration with the most rigorous personal discipline in the service of an aesthetic ideal is, of course, the dandy. And Banville does not hesitate to identify the "real smoker" with that Baudelairean figure of the artist. He writes about the nature of the concentration and single-mindedness of the real smoker in language that could have been lifted, that must have been inspired, by Baudelaire's reflections on dandyism in "Le peintre de la vie moderne." Cigarette smoking, a frivolous activity, becomes the whole end of life, which for Banville fulfills the definition of dandyism. The dandy carries aesthetic refinement to elegant lengths by beautifully performing activities that are absolutely not worth doing. Banville like Baudelaire appreciates the heroism of this aristocratic pose, in the midst of an industrial revolution that had dethroned both aristocracy and heroes. The uselessness of the activity the dandy refines permits the disinterestedness that, since Kant, has been seen to be inseparable from pure aesthetic judgments of taste. The dandy aims to be able to do what he does for its own sake, not for any profit with which it might enhance his personal interests. Smoking is such a worthless, unproductive activity that it lends itself to becoming the whole purpose of life—if life is to be justified aesthetically, and not according to some utilitarian principle.

Banville deplores the passing of dandyism in a society that has become utterly devoted to material possession and no longer thinks it worthy to renounce the world in favor of an exclusive obsession or preoccupation. He writes: "In a word, everyone wants everything; however the cigarette, which is the most imperious, the most engaging, the most demanding, the most loving, the most refined of mistresses, tolerates nothing which is not her, and compromises with nothing: it [elle] inspires a passion that is absolute, exclusive, ferocious like gambling or reading" (234). The cigarette is a woman, a terrible, ferocious, demanding, but absolutely, passionately desirable one, who allows no compromise and no alternative to her jealously required devotion.

In this respect, the cigarette, says Banville, may be distinguished from the pipe and the cigar. Smoking them, after a meal or at other carefully chosen moments, satisfies a need, and the need, once satisfied, for the moment disappears. But cigarettes obey another, more perverse logic of desire. "It is quite otherwise with the cigarette; it creates a delicious, voluptuous, cruel and soft excitation, which, the more one yields to it, the more it renews itself, and which never sleeps and is never extinguished" (234).

The pleasure of cigarette smoking is distinguished from that procured by other forms of tobacco consumption insofar as it defies the economy of



Cigarette Dandy, Marseille

Photo © Henri Cartier-Bresson. By permission of Magnum Photos, Inc.

what Freud calls the pleasure principle. According to that principle, which interprets pleasure on the model of need, the satisfaction of a desire results in the elimination of the desire, the way an infant's demand for milk and desire for the breast are perfectly gratified by the mother's nursing. Cigarettes, however, defy that economy of pleasure: they do not satisfy desire, they exasperate it. The more one yields to the excitation of smoking, the more deliciously, voluptuously, cruelly, and sweetly it awakens desire—it inflames what it presumes to extinguish. The perversity of this excitation consists in the fact that it never sleeps and is never extinguished; it is removed from the economy of utility in which the expenditure of energy can be calculated, according to an equation of profit and loss. Filling a lack hollows out an even greater lack that demands even more urgently to be filled.

In a strange reversal of the temporality of desire and fulfillment of desire, cigarette smoking seems to run desire backward—as if the fulfillment were even more the desire than the desire it fulfills, as if what normally comes after, comes upon desire, comes before. The logic of this desire, manifestly not utilitarian, is more nearly aesthetic. Cigarette smoking, like a Kantian work of art, does not serve any purpose, has no aim outside itself; Banville, the Parnassian poet, seems to be advancing a doctrine of “la cigarette pour la cigarette,” in terms that bear the closest comparison with his aesthetic ideology. Banville recognizes how radically useless cigarette smoking must be: “This murderous pastime,” he says, demands “more qualities, aptitudes, and marvelous gifts than all that is required to enchant, to dominate, to govern men and even women.” He acknowledges explicitly that to give oneself to cigarettes is “to put one's unique concern into creating a desire that cannot be satisfied.” And yet he concludes his “little study” with a question that is inescapably rhetorical: “However, is it not a pretty dandyism,” he asks, “to give one's life to a cruel, inextinguishable, and completely useless desire?” (234).

Of course, the very existence of Banville's study implies that he himself is not this kind of dandy; the mere fact of his writing indicates, not that he has found prettier forms of dandyism (in his system, being a cigarette dandy is the highest form of artistic life), but that he has decided to settle for the less pure, more messy business of printing words on pages, with all its vagaries and accidents—its inevitable loss of control. The sacrifice of the poet is as nothing compared to that of the smoker, who abandons every material concern for the sake of the goddess: “The smoker of cigarettes must always, at each instant, have two hands free and lips also; he

can therefore be neither someone ambitious, nor a worker, nor, with a very few exceptions, a poet or an artist; every task is forbidden him, even the ineffable pleasure of screwing [*le baiser*]” (234).

It is clear that smoking, if it is a form of aesthetic pleasure, the production of something like a work of art, is nevertheless—in theory—all but incompatible with the production of actual works of art, of poems, for example, such as those that Banville himself might write. Thus, while he excludes himself from the select company of the cigarette dandies, the highest class of artists, in order actually to produce art, he realizes that what he creates can only be a vulgar material version of the poetic purity that continuously smoking cigarettes exhales. It is manifest that Banville does not include himself among the real smokers, for to do so would be to exclude him from the possibility of artistically describing them.

Banville recognizes certain important exceptions to the rigid rule he lays down. He allows that although cigarettes may be considered to be absolutely useless, they can be said to lead somewhere, to give the smoker something: “But in the end this tyrannical cigarette that takes everything from you, chases you away from everything, exiles you from everything, doesn't it lead you anywhere and give you something? Yes, it gives a calm and virile resignation which does not exclude action, and it carries you away in inalterable mystic joy [*l'inaltérable joie mystique*]. All the great smokers of cigarettes are among the resigned [*les résignés*] and the mystics, never among the ambitious or the talkers” (236).

Unfazed by all the exceptions that spring to mind, Banville grants the exceptions but then uses them to prove his rule: “To tell the truth, reality seems to give me the lie. But it is only because it is ill understood” (237). He begins with George Sand, who “was one of the most terrible smokers of cigarettes that has ever existed” (237). After five minutes in the theater, at the rehearsal of her plays, she became entirely incapable of understanding a word of what she had written. If her opinion was required by the actors, she would light up a cigarette, which promptly invited the appearance of the “incorruptible fireman, who in the theater no more tolerates the conflagration of a cigarette than that of the building itself.” Banville explains the seeming paradox of this “woman of action, never ceasing to create and to produce,” who nevertheless never ceased to smoke. During the day she was a “bonne bourgeoisie” who liked entomology and making jam, but at night she became “the prey of a daemon of genius, which invaded, dominated her thinking, and dictated to her sublime pages.” Hence her creativity took place “outside herself,” was accomplished “without her

having to get involved,” and she could smoke “as if she had nothing at all to do” (237). Since inspiration dictated her extraordinary productivity, it was as if she herself had nothing to do but be a mystically resigned spectator, actively passive, at the spectacle of her prodigious creation, passively active. The exception that Banville made for artists and poets has to do with the ambiguous status of the “act” of artistic creation, which is not exactly doing anything at all and yet may result in the most frenetic activity. Just as we saw in Sartre's *L'être et le néant*, the fact of smoking cigarettes has a privileged connection to this other kind of (non)activity that is the production of art.

Banville interrogates another seeming exception to his rule, that of the emperor Napoleon III, who was “one of the greatest, one of the most obstinate smokers of cigarettes.” How does one explain that a man of such vaulting ambition should have been so in love with cigarettes, the passion of the mystically resigned? It was because he was entirely fatalistic, and considered that everything he did was in obedience to a preordained plan over which he had no control, which fulfilled itself without even his participation. “Thus he was resigned in the most unexpected good fortune and in the most terrible reverses, and when everything was finished [when he was deposed in 1870], as usual, he tranquilly lit a cigarette.” This “visible daydream [*rêverie visible*],” this “smoke which carries the soul into paradises more immaterial than those of opium or hashish,” provided the head of state with “a supreme calm” (237).

Finally, Banville considers the case of Victor Hugo, the most active, ambitious, epically prodigious writer of the century. Hugo execrated cigarettes and is not known to have ever tolerated tobacco around him—either in the 1830s and 1840s, when he was a peer of the realm, or later as an exile and a proscribed author. Only once, says Banville, did he allow people to smoke in his presence, and that was during the siege of Paris in 1870, when Banville saw national guard officers at Hugo's table smoking after dessert. But that, says Banville, was the “Terrible Year!” (239).

Even though he belonged approximately to the same illustrious era as Hugo, Alfred de Musset, dreamer, feminine, charmer, has always been a smoker of cigarettes. I see him still on the couch, having near at hand, on his table, a pack of Marylands, a packet of papers with the image of the smuggler, and a box of cylindrical matches, in wood painted red. As the poet exercises an art in which retouching is as impossible as in frescoes, and must always succeed at the first shot, alone, perhaps,

among writers, he has the right to light a cigarette to reread the page he has just written. But a Titan like Hugo did not have to reread his pages, time being too precious to him. (239)

The difference between Musset and Hugo is that between a poet and a Titan; poets like Musset who practice an ephemeral lyric art depend on the inspiration of the moment and write their little poems in a single burst. There is no work to writing lyrical poetry, Banville seems to be saying, but only a burst of energetic exertion that takes no time and leaves plenty of time to do "nothing" like rereading, during which time cigarette smoking is possible. A giant worker like Hugo, on the other hand, does not smoke, but for obverse reasons: for him there is no inactive time when smoking is possible; every moment is preciously reserved for his ambitious, creative production. It is by such convoluted arguments that Banville seeks to prove, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that there is some fundamental incompatibility between active work and smoking; what he actually succeeds in demonstrating is the peculiar ambivalence that surrounds the "act" of writing and the curiously intimate relation it bears to the "act" of smoking cigarettes.

A calm and virile resignation, inalterable mystic joy—Banville does not explain why cigarettes, of all drugs, have the power to induce these particular states. They correspond perhaps to the two conditions we have already seen in Baudelaire: the double postulation of the artist, concentration and evaporation, the steeling of the self that comes from resignation and the loss of the self in mystical expansion. Understood in the absolute terms of these conditions, Banville's prediction was profoundly true: there can no longer be—and there are no longer—real smokers of the kind he describes, dandies of the cigarette who devote themselves with an exclusive, intolerant passion to something that is entirely useless. The aristocratic beauty of that pose flies in the face of a world that, as Banville says, no longer permits the renunciation of material well-being in favor of an "ideal" of beauty and pleasure like those the real smoker pursues, sacrificing everything for this absolutely demanding, cruel, imperious, but most adorable of "mistresses." Writing at a moment when cigarette smoking was on the brink of becoming a universal passion, Banville was no doubt right in asserting that there could no longer be—in a brief time there would be no longer—any real cigarette smokers left.

It may well seem, a century later, that there will shortly be no more cigarette smokers left at all, anywhere. What was once the unique preroga-

tive of the most refined and futile dandies, having become the luxury of billions of people, may abruptly vanish. Will anything have been lost? On the day when some triumphant antitabagist crushes under his heel the last cigarette manufactured on the face of the earth, will the world have any reason to grieve, perhaps to mourn the loss of a cultural institution, a social instrument of beauty, a wand of dreams? Or what of those who have given their lives to cigarettes, who have died prematurely because they could not stop smoking? Do they deserve no respect, no admiration for their sacrifice? For them, as Sartre says, a life without smoking was not worth living. For them, as Zeno says, it was a way of life—their own way to death.

- hundredth anniversary of Jean Nicot's first published description of tobacco in Europe, presented by the state-owned French company SEITA (Service pour l'exploitation industrielle du tabac et des allumettes), which used to be the Régie du Tabac before its reincorporation in 1860. Recently this company has been reconstituted as a "society," changing its gender from le Service to la Société.
- 6 Sir J. M. Barrie, creator of Peter Pan, was a passionate admirer of Raleigh; in 1905, in *My Lady Nicotine*, he wrote: "When Raleigh, in honor of whom England should have changed its name, introduced tobacco into this country, the glorious Elizabethan age began. I am aware that those hateful persons called Original researchers now maintain that Raleigh was not the man, but to them I turn a deaf ear. I know, I feel, that with the introduction of tobacco England woke up from a long sleep. Suddenly a new zest had been given to life. The glory of existence became a thing to speak of. Men who had hitherto only concerned themselves with the narrow things of home put a pipe into their mouths and became philosophers. Poets and dramatists smoked until all ignoble ideas were driven from them, and into their place rushed such high thoughts as the world had not known before. Petty jealousies no longer had hold of statesmen, who smoked, and agreed to work together for the public weal. Soldiers and sailors felt when engaged with a foreign foe, that they were fighting for their pipes. The whole country was stirred by the ambition to live up to tobacco. Everyone, in short, had now a lofty ideal constantly before him" (Barrie 104-6).
- 7 Claude Lévi-Strauss repeats with conviction that a comfortable bourgeois of the eighteenth century lived approximately as well as a wealthy citizen of the Roman Empire (*Tristes tropiques* 353).
- 8 "I, myself, who feel singularly obliged to lie and hardly care to give certitude and authority to what I say, notice all the same, with respect to arguments at hand, that being heated either by the other's resistance or by the heat of the narration itself, I enlarge and expand my subjects by means of gestures, vigorous expression, and force of words; and also by extension and amplification, not without interest in the simple truth. . . . Lively, noisy discourse, like mine, ordinarily gets easily carried away by hyperbole" (Montaigne 239-40).
- 9 The cigarette and the whore are identified in this anonymous little poem:

Au quartier de Lorette
L'on aime au jour le jour
Et bien plus qu'un amour
Dure une cigarette.
(Quoted in Rival 171)

1 WHAT IS A CIGARETTE?

- 1 The photograph by Brassai is entitled "Autoportrait, Boulevard Saint Jacques, 1931-32." It appears on the cover of the catalog of a recent New York exposition of Brassai's work at the Houk Friedman Gallery on Madison Avenue.
- 2 See Louis Pauwels, *Louange de tabac*.

2 CIGARETTES ARE SUBLIME

- 1 In order to help the reader perceive Laforgue's parody of "Correspondances," the text of Baudelaire's most famous poem is provided below, followed by a newly published translation by James McGowan:

Correspondances

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers un forêt de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profondes unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
—Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.
(Baudelaire, vol. 1, 11)

Nature is a temple, where the living
Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech;
Man walks within these groves of symbols, each
Of which regards him as a kindred thing.

As the long echoes, shadowy, profound,
Heard from afar, blend in a unity,
Vast as the night, as sunlight's clarity,
So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond.

Odours there are, fresh as a baby's skin,
Mellow as oboes, green as meadow grass,
—Others corrupted, rich, triumphant, full,

Having dimensions infinitely vast,
Frankincense, musk, ambergris, benjamin,
Singing the senses' rapture, and the soul's.
(Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil* 19)