

## A DIFFICULT FREEDOM

*Democracy, Disappointment and the Indefatigable*

Aishwary Kumar

Being is becoming.

—Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*

But what is an architecture of becoming?

—Eisenman, *Written into the Void*

Architecture is a kind of eloquence of power in forms—now persuading, even flattering, now only commanding.

—Nietzsche, ‘Skirmishes of an Untimely Man’

‘I am not a part of the whole,’ the moral and political philosopher Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), soon to become a new and fragile republic’s most audacious constitutional theorist, declared in the Bombay Legislative Assembly in 1939. ‘I am a part apart’ (1978–2003, 10: 166).<sup>1</sup> Already, in his critique of Ambedkar’s revolutionary manifesto *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) three years earlier, Mohandas Gandhi had sighed in nearly audible relief at the sort of political freedom that usually produced such exemplary declarations of independence from Ambedkar. ‘Thank God,’ Gandhi wrote of ‘Ambedkar’s ‘indictment’ of Hinduism in his newspaper *Harijan*, ‘[he] is singularly alone’ (1999, 69, 206).<sup>2</sup> One would trust absolutely no anti-colonial wordsmith other than Gandhi to compress, in merely half a sentence of ironic brilliance, the majestic whole of Ambedkar’s enduring, transcendent condition: his singular solitude.

It has since been said of this solitude more than once, more than ironically, and not without a trace of Brahminic malice that Ambedkar, at once the architect of India’s constitutional founding and its anti-hero, died exactly as he had anticipated or perhaps even wanted, if not perversely deserved: in Nietzschean disappointment with the world of political morality; disenchanted with the system of laws that he (rightly) believed merely used the jargon of constitutionalism to legitimise the

petty world of archaic, ritualised meanness; and betrayed by the moral and epistemological value he placed only ever on the power of his doubt. Repelled equally by the civilisational grandstanding of anti-colonial liberals and their ultranationalist counterparts, the philosophical sceptic in him was left without a homeland in a world full of nation states. A thinker racing defiantly against death to complete, in punishing illness, his masterwork *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1956), it has been insinuated that Ambedkar finally saw the futility of his belief in modern legislative statecraft. As his trust in the power of constitutional norms to hold off against majoritarian assaults eroded, he turned to another belief, another religion, instead.

More than one nationalist has since had the temerity to suggest that this ‘turn to religion’ proved that Gandhi had been right all along about Ambedkar’s inadequately theorised, metaphysical anger against Hinduism. Other myths have implied worse. Any turn to the language of religiosity in politics, it has been claimed, must itself always be, at its heart, secretly ‘Gandhian’, so that Ambedkar’s final turn revealed him to be just that: an alienated soul who must return home—as he does—even if he exits it. The most obscurantist measure of all, both within nationalist institutions at home and the transnational outposts of this ideological apparatus overseas, has been the unrelenting and tacit drive to bury that which is singular in Ambedkar’s critique of religious violence: the will to conversion and the monumental act of political faith through which this will was expressed in the final months of 1956, as Ambedkar exited Hinduism with half a million of his own, whose lives, in his searing words, had been reduced by the barbarity of caste ‘from [their] millions to [mere] fractions’ (1978–2003, 5: 229–246). It is a singularity whose inspiration Ambedkar drew from another classicism and its theory of government, another genealogy of Indian morals and, perhaps most obliquely, another conception of political forgiveness, one whose sources lay not in the epic traditions and their unforgiving heroes (favoured by reactionary and liberal nationalists in equal measure if for different ends) but instead in the one associated with the Mauryan imperium and the monarchical figure of Ashoka.

Significantly, Ashoka’s turn to Buddhism nearly three centuries before Christ came not only at the height of the warrior’s imperial dominance over the Gangetic north and beyond but also at the moment of his greatest, most bloody, and most desolate victory over the peninsular in Kalinga. In this moment of turn of sovereignty to Buddhism lies crystallised a political theory of conversion—the *conversion of violence to force*—that shines not in the grimness of Ashoka’s desolate triumph but in the incandescence of his disappointment with war (and himself), not in his inconsolable

disinterest in ruling but in the majesty of imperial justice. No atheological tradition other than Buddhism gives Ambedkar this revolutionary example of political disappointment and majestic judgement at one and the same time, one in which justice is sought not through a punitive exercise of power but through a force that is capable of yielding.<sup>3</sup> No religious tradition other than Buddhism gives him an epistemology of nothingness—a universality steeped in the primacy of non-self—and morals for the *transcendence* and reformation of power—yielding—at its sovereign source at one and the same time. Compressed in this atheological turn is the figure of a heroic exemplar who is not God but a fallible mortal, soaked in disappointment with his method, yet willing to forgive both himself and his vanquished others. Conversion enters Indian history through this turn, through this imperial *torsion*, one that is as classical as India's fabled non-violence, appearing on its horizon centuries before colonial Christianity maligns it and gives nationalism yet another reason to betray Ambedkar's exemplary inheritance.

This is an exemplarity rooted in forgiveness in which, for Ambedkar, the 'will to punish' is replaced by the will to conversion. This conversion occurs, however, not in the twilight of the idols—this is no fall into disenchanting, faithless nihilism—but at the high noon of Mauryan political sovereignty, one whose architecture of righteousness radiates its grace out from the centre of the imperial capital rather than from its monastic peripheries. In this exemplary genealogy of political faith, the architect converts to another religion not to relinquish power but to henceforth use it with justice. The architect turns to faith not to renounce the logic and gravity of force, or rule even, but to refuse the place of unforgiving vengeance in it.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the myth around Ambedkar's disappointment, with its morals willfully misread and its politics resentfully imputed, lives on. One disobedient doubt led to another reckless one until that day in December 1956 when Ambedkar finally departed, dying as restless a spirit as he had been born. In fact, the formidable nationalist C. Rajagopalachari, who had published exactly a decade earlier a tract of political calculus devoted entirely to denouncing Ambedkar's constitutional vision, titled *Ambedkar Refuted* (1946), uses in his 1956 obituary for Ambedkar the expression 'restless spirit' in as many words.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, Rajagopalachari hoped that Ambedkar would find peace in death! To make it more ambiguous still, the obituary is not lacking in Rajagopalachari's grudging admiration of Ambedkar either, but that is the very point.

Figure 3.1. 'Rajaji's Tribute,' Indian Express, 7 December 1956

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## RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN BETWEEN 28th FEBRUARY AND 14th MARCH 1956

### General Amnesty for Offenders

Special Correspondent  
**NEW DELHI, Dec. 6.**—The announcement of the Election Commission that the elections for Feb. 28 and Mar. 14 has been decided upon with one election irregularities and during the first general election (1952) resulting in the disqualification of 1,000 persons throughout the country has been decided upon with one election irregularities and during the first general election (1952) resulting in the disqualification of 1,000 persons throughout the country.

### P.M.'s FLAG DAY APPEAL

This afternoon a statement of our armed forces left India for Egypt. This was the third occasion when they have been called upon to serve outside India in the course of peace. In the front of the varied duties that our men of the army, navy and air force have to perform, these tasks demand a high degree of efficiency and equally to serve citizens in a friendly way. I hope before they have gone abroad, men to focus and then to look back, and wherever they have served they have received praise and added to the credit of India.

In India, during floods and other calamities, our Army and Air Force men have done splendid work. I like this type of work, because it indicates the varied activities of our armed forces in the service of the country.

On Flag Day we can show our appreciation of these young men who serve our country both here and abroad and serve it well. I trust that our people will contribute generously on this day to the Flag Day fund for amenities for our men in the Indian services.

New Delhi, November 26, 1956.

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## World Bank Selects Schemes For Aid

### —T. T. K. URGES EARLY FLOW OF FUNDS

(From Our Special Representative)  
**NEW DELHI, Dec. 6.**

The Union Finance Minister, Mr. T. T. Krishnamachari, has impressed on the World Bank President, Mr. Eugene Black, that "it is essential for the flow of funds from the bank to commence at the earliest possible date" for such of the projects as have been selected by the bank for financial assistance.

Expressing his deep appreciation to Mr. Black for his spirit of co-operation and understanding, Mr. Krishnamachari says, "The possibility of the early commencement of the flow of funds to the bank will greatly facilitate the economic development of India, in which, I know you are so deeply interested."

The World Bank President, in his letter to the Indian Finance Minister, had indicated that the bank was considering the selection of the Indian Iron and Steel Company, Railways, projects of shipping and port development, the Kerala and Bihar hydro-electric projects, the iron and steel projects of I.V.C., and the expansion of the Bombay steam plant at Bombay.

The full text of the letter of Mr. Black and Mr. Krishnamachari, have been released for publication today simultaneously at New Delhi and Washington.

### India's Case Strong

The impression that the publication of the letter of the World Bank President to Mr. Black, has created in India, is further confirmed by the publication of a letter, received by the Indian Government, from the World Bank President, after the latter had visited India.

After briefly outlining the case for the immediate release of the funds, Mr. Black's letter states that the bank's assistance on railways would be made available by the end of 1957.

This would be followed by the release of the funds for the other projects, which would be made available by the end of 1957.

Mr. Black's letter also states that the bank's assistance on railways would be made available by the end of 1957.



Chinese Prime Minister Chou En-lai enjoyed a slip of coconut water at the shore-restaurant in Mahabalipuram which he visited on Thursday morning.

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## Ambedkar Dead: Houses Of Parliament Adjourn

### A SYMBOL OF SOCIAL REVOLT, SAYS NEHRU

NEW DELHI, Dec. 6.

**DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR, former Union Law Minister and one of the architects of India's Constitution, died here this morning.**

At 4 a.m. today morning he was found lying in his room, with his head resting on the floor.

The body of Dr. Ambedkar was taken to a special mortuary in the Indian Army Hospital at New Delhi.

Mrs. Ambedkar accompanied the body to the mortuary.

Earlier today, the Houses of Parliament adjourned for the day.

(Continued on Page 8, Column 6)

### Pakistan Preparing To 'Liberate' Kashmir

**KARACHI, Dec. 6.**

THE Pakistan Press today quoted "a Minister" of Pakistan-held Kashmir to say, "We have no faith left in the U.N. who have failed to do anything except discussing the (Kashmir) matter."

The "Minister," Muzaffar Nuruddin, is reported to have said, "That is why Mr. Nehru says he is not at all interested in the matter being referred back to the U.N. as he knows it for certain that they are incapable of doing anything material."

According to the report Mr. Nuruddin said in an interview in Karachi yesterday, "The Azad Kashmir (Pakistan held part of Kashmir) Government has ordered compulsory military training for youths in the liberated territory to help train the young for any possible emergency. The hour of liberation for the people of occupied Kashmir (Jammu and Kashmir) is not very far. Let me make it quite clear that we do not depend upon the U.N. for our freedom."

Meanwhile, Azad and Azad detachments have been ordered with interest a report from London linking Pakistan's plan to the issue with the possible British attitude to Pakistan's claim on Kashmir.

**MADRAS, Dec. 6.** The U.S. today relinquished the ownership of 1,00,000 acres of land worth 50 million dollars and its military base here.

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## 'Rajaji's Tribute'

### A Restless Spirit Has Found Peace'

—RAJAJI'S TRIBUTE

**MADRAS, Dec. 6.**

Mr. C. Rajagopalachari was shocked and grieved when the news of the passing away of Dr. Ambedkar was conveyed to him, this afternoon by the Indian Express representative.

"A restless spirit has found peace," Rajaji observed. "Dr. Ambedkar was one of those who, till Mahatma came, were unapproachable and who are now unable to get out of the complex tangle of all the issues that have been unceasingly posed."

Ambedkar showed the fact that he was not a man who was unapproachable and who are now unable to get out of the complex tangle of all the issues that have been unceasingly posed.

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**THE 'MANU' OF MODERN INDIA**

Called the "Manu of modern India" for his monumental work in drafting the Constitution, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had only recently emerged from a long illness.

He was the first Indian to receive a Ph.D. from the University of London. He was also the first Indian to be elected to the Council of the University of London.

Dr. Ambedkar went to Columbia University in the U.S. to study law and sociology. In 1912 he became the first Indian to be elected to the Council of the University of London.

He was also the first Indian to be elected to the Council of the University of London.

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It is not an absolute lack of admiration that drives nationalist mythology around Ambedkar's purported dejection with India's constitutional concord or with the anti-minority state it yielded. What drives nationalist mythology is a potent, prejudiced mixture of the majoritarian desire to appropriate Ambedkar, on the one hand, and on the other, its burning resentment against the indefatigable radicality of their founding architect's disappointment in them, one in which Ambedkar, by embracing Buddhism, leaves neither the moral sovereignty of majoritarian religiosity over public life intact nor the political purity of the national state, with its barely concealed theological undertones, unvanquished. Even Ashok Gopal's magisterial biography, aptly titled *A Part Apart* (2023), cannot help but conjure in its closing scenes the figure of the brooding architect, making it carry the grand finale of Ambedkar's constitutional act. The architect's inappropriable, mortal self might have long been buried in amnesia. But a silhouette of this figure is kept alive in nationalist consciousness and ultranationalist rhetoric alike, where it might be kept frozen in stasis until the catastrophic finale of the republic itself begins to unfold. Who is this architect? Or better still, what is an architect? And how to do democratic things with it again?

### *An Exemplary Disappointment*

Indictments about Ambedkar's 'restless spirit' and his rhetorical 'overdoing' in 'a certain 'manner of language and utterance,' as Nehru (1956) put it in his own grudging obituary, which cut so close to his decisions and judgements—so close that nobody except Ambedkar himself might illuminate anything even vaguely resembling a truth about them—grow not only out of nationalism's wilful, curated amnesia about the figure it calls its architect; they also fester in its epistemological illiteracy about the structure of his moral doubt and his almost prophetic disappointment in India.

The most elementary truth is, humanity has never constructed anything durable without first doubting that it can be built at all. When the architect puts his first line—a line of force—on paper, he begins by drawing nothing more and nothing less than silhouettes of his doubt, fuelled by his passion for the possible. It is in the hands of the architect that human finitude first meets the insurmountable law of gravity, and the earthly desire for transcendence meets the force of natural law. To speak in the language of a radiant, transcendental faith as Ambedkar did for decades must, therefore, be taken, in equal part, to be a function of the architect's fundamental doubt, perhaps even a swerve away from

his otherwise indefatigable faith—and Ambedkar’s was invincible—in the human capacity to build durable forms in this life. The faith that Ambedkar brought militantly to life in 1956, weeks before his death, with half a million others born like him—outcastes who appeared for the first time as a people subject not to the caste contract but masters of their own judgement—was both a democratic overcoming and moral reaffirmation of this very doubt. In its architecture of disappointment, this faith was nothing like the old, dreary religiosity that his nationalist detractors had for so long championed.

Fanatics of extreme nationalism have always tarred conversion with their self-righteous brush, accusing Ambedkar of a calculus, as if their own decision to die with the religion they were born into has ever itself been free of calculations of privilege and generational gain. Why must a convert, a heretic, a radical atheist even, meet a burden of proof about his sacrificial clarity and truthfulness that those with nothing but moral inertia—indifference to their own plight and of others—are never asked to meet? How is the decision to stay on with what one is born with a more righteous decision than a rejection of that which does not let one live?

The moral point is, conversion is not a vow of monastic disinterest; it is an affirmation of life, of survival, of the power of judgement itself. It never claims to be a renunciation of interest. It only holds a sharp mirror to the brutal masquerade of ascetic disinterest behind which nationalism—and its majoritarian criterion of truth—perjures. Conversion seeks not a religion indigenous to this land or that; it is not lured by mysteries of this world or another. Nationalist attempts to frame its power in those terms miss the profoundly anti-authoritarian politics of human freedom at its core. At the heart of conversion instead lies a tenacious moral commitment to the gravity of truth and to a political world without majoritarian deception.<sup>6</sup> Conversion is a call to reclaim the earthly dignity of the outnumbered—the minor—in a world brutalised by hostile exclusions of the majority that surrounds, like a mob, even those it calls its own.

If conversion is a form of *pragmatism* at all, then—and by pragmatism, I mean a commitment to non-metaphysical, atheological truths that penetrate the studied wall of religious violence only to exit its economy of cruelty on its other side—it is because conversion’s political expression is distinctly anti-authoritarian. The many forms and expressions of the jointure between ‘pragmatism and *anti-authoritarianism*’, as Richard Rorty (2021) cautions, disappoint too (and they do so more viciously than God). Given how obdurate the tentacles of majoritarian deception are, conversion cannot ever be a guarantee against disappointment. It can only ever be an indefatigable will to truth, one that perseveres and

yet almost always finds itself bound ultimately towards disappointment in fellow human beings, if only with more forgiveness. If Ambedkar remains—despite his profound scepticism about the majoritarian will to stability—an architect of anything durable or immortal, it is of this bond between disappointment and truth, this fraught relation between forgiveness and democracy.

Whether or not he ever saw his own self in the classical figure of the architect, there are moments when it would seem that Ambedkar might himself call this immortal relation between disappointment and truth—the daunting battle for a justice without vengeance—the Constitution. In that sense, the architect is a singular witness to political disappointment and the many identities that swirl out of it. He is a bearer of judgement that cuts closest to the self and the self's reflexive knowledge of itself, its own identity only ever forged in response to those that surround it, sometimes with vengeance, often in resentment and, once in a while, in adoration. Nobody in the modern anti-colonial tradition with the exception of Frantz Fanon (2004, 97) is more aware of this fragile ambiguity of identity—of identities forged like 'empty shells' in the misanthropic crucible of nationalist zeal, its tribalism temporarily concealed by a forgetful euphoria—than Ambedkar. Yet nobody yields to this ambiguity with greater hope than Ambedkar, if only to be disappointed.

Yet the scaffolds of Ambedkar's own self, it has often been implied, could bear only one identity, or possessive individualism, at a time. Whether as an unbridled craftsman of constitutional law anchored in a modernist glorification of state power or as a disillusioned convert at war against Indic epistemologies of the 'self' and nationalist theologies of the 'soul', he could have only ever ended his life more alienated than he was born. Let us note, however, that neither the self nor the soul has ever been free from punitive liturgies of self-mastery and violent spectacles of modern self-determination. Both, Ambedkar had himself warned as if he were in a quiet dialogue with his enemies, would soon fuel the rhetoric of all stripes of fanatical nationalisms. Perhaps his affinity for classical Buddhist epistemologies of non-self (*anatta*) and, most fundamentally, emptiness (*sunnyata*) was anchored by this deep distrust of the majority and the 'risk' it brought to the democratic covenant in its misanthropic quest for limitless power, infinitude even (Kumar 2015). The appetite of the majority for self-concentration, the desire to make everything about itself and oneself, hid right under the skin of imperial and liberal visions of self-determination alike. But rather than quibbling with the prejudices that mark the verdict on the sources of Ambedkar's self, this chapter seeks to use them as beginnings for a moral psychology of democratic disappointment—and of its resentful other, which I will call the *majoritarian signature*—instead.

Can a constitutionalist's belief in popularly elected government as an instrument of the common good, despite the deceptions and perjuries that the government has always concealed, be a trusted antidote to the resentments of the very majority that authorises such a brutal signature (*signature* because we cannot, in Ambedkar's wake, think of the majority, in all its brutalism and passivity, without India's tacit, coercive caste contract)? Or is it a militantly melancholic faith in and embrace of disappointment—*unhope*, Du Bois (2015, 157) might say—instead that keeps the secretive heart of democracy beating against power?<sup>7</sup>

More oblique and less imperious than anger, disappointment lies somewhere between a value (that the reserved self silently nurses) and a miracle (that the dissolving self unavoidably yields to). Disappointment at once frees and drags the self into strife with itself, imbuing it with a truth-telling courage and an inconsolable force at one and the same time.<sup>8</sup> This force, under the grief of betrayal, yields itself—this force-bearing self—away so unconditionally, so fearlessly, fiercely even, that it can now see durable, immortal justice neither in ascetic delusions of self-mastery nor in the seething silences of masculine *ressentiment* (rarely two things) but in the freedom of others alone. Therein lies the irreducible difference between disappointment and resentment: both are effects of betrayal, and yet, only in disappointment does the self yield to the other; in resentment, on the other hand, the self inverts within and concentrates itself.

If you are disappointed, James Baldwin writes in his 1963 essay for the *New York Times* 'The Artist's Struggle for Integrity', 'you must understand that your pain is trivial, except insofar as you can connect it to other people's pain' (2010, 53). The disappointed self thinks not simply of and for the other; it yields its very place—the self's place—to the other. To be disappointed, in other words, is to have the courage not simply to *be* but instead the courage to *not* be. Baldwin, like Hannah Arendt, calls this yielding 'understanding'. Insofar as one's own self is given at all, insofar as its identity yields any truth in it, its givenness can be grasped only as the yield of the injurable, vulnerable other: the other who is no less desolate—and no less worthy of forgiveness—than oneself.

The exemplary power of disappointment for democracy—and its constant presence in it—lies in this capacity to forgive without forgetting, to begin again despite desolation, to yield and found at the same time. Ambedkar's disappointment in India was an antidote to the desolation he foresaw would be left behind by majoritarian resentments, not a denial of the republic's heroic idealism. The force of his disappointment—moral and epistemological—came precisely from the fact that he was, at the very seat of its constituent power, its unhelpful architect.

There is a long history and inheritance of revolutionary critique of political hope, a history in which prophetic solitude and inappropriate solidarity coalesce like a miracle at the moment of majestic despair. For without the solidarity, all pain is indeed trivial; its alternative, pace Arendt, is merely a powerless, wallowing 'pity'. This chapter engages with this aporia—the placeless passage between freedom and unhope—placing Ambedkar's theory of political judgement and his recalibration of the scaffolds, the very architecture, of the self at its centre. It is a self that, as Ambedkar posits with Marx, is always already a moving part in a cruel, unforgiving system of *relations of reproduction* of the self, albeit one that has a singularly Indian name: caste. In the process, the chapter examines why democracy, crippled by this reproducible (and reproductive) cruelty, must rethink the value of disappointment in politics. My beginning will be a figure in the history of political thought that has been braided on to Ambedkar's afterlife as if it were the entirety of his indefatigable arc—the figure of the architect—but one which he radically inverts for democracy, in his very disappointment with it.

### *The Gravity of Truth*

Upon being asked about the aims of the October Revolution, Lenin had offered in November 1920 the unforgettable formula 'Communism is Soviet power plus electrification' (Lenin 1920). Hannah Arendt calls this revolutionary vision 'curious and long-forgotten,' although she does lend it a decisive presence in postwar political theory (1963, 55). More recently, Jean-Luc Nancy has reclaimed the exact declaration, in Lenin's own words: 'Communism is Soviet power plus electrification' (2017, 357).

This revolutionary love of fabrication and planning, its rhetoric of grids and wires, on the one hand, and visions of almost annihilative surge, pulse and force, on the other, seems puzzling only because so much of modern political thought has been preoccupied with the destructive violence that accompanies modern revolutions at their inception that its most axiomatic principle, one that holds a revolution unto itself, is entirely lost. A 'revolution' is an acceptably theoretical term, it seems, to describe or cover up either the bloody fusillade launched over a colonial theatre or a genocidal orgy among neighbours ripped by civil war. Yet the true keeper of the modern revolutionary treasure is not the alleged arsonist but the scrupulous architect, not the polemist but the constitutionalist, not the technician of combat but the student of force, not the punishing priests of stasis but the forgiving partisans of crisis.

The revolution is a *politics of becoming given a new architecture*, one in which the architect is not so much a figure of stability as she is, right in the vortex of a crisis, the bearer of a promise: the promise that new lines of force will appear on the horizon, no matter how blurred the sky, and that they will endure, no matter how sprawling the ruins on earth. Architecture, Peter Eisenman writes of his craft, is the art of movement rather than of stasis (2007). The greatest revolutionaries—in politics as in architecture—are practitioners of dynamic, durable forms rather than of static, stable norms.<sup>9</sup> So only an architecture built out of annihilation, of ‘blurring’ and impurity, can be properly called an architecture of human freedom and of political becoming. The constitution that such an architecture of durability yields cannot also not be an ‘exhumation,’ an ‘archaeology’ of foundations. ‘The task is one of gathering survivals of the past, placing them together and making them tell the story of their birth,’ Ambedkar writes in his classic archeology of the caste sciences, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (1948). ‘The task is analogous to that of the archaeologist who constructs a city from broken stones or the paleontologist who conceives an extinct animal from scattered bones and teeth or,’ he declares finally, in a militant embrace of political theory as democratic imagination, ‘of a painter who reads the lines of the horizon and the smallest vestiges on the slopes to make up a scene. In this sense, the book is a work of art even more than of history’ (1978–2003, 7: 244).

To Ambedkar’s unfinished work of art, which involves a politics not only of revolutionary memory but of democratic anti-amnesia, I shall return later in this chapter. Here, let us note the kinship he forges between founding and archaeology, or better still, between architecture and deconstruction. It is almost a universal element in political iconography that the revolutionary has always had one hand held out towards the future still to come. This is not because revolutionaries despise the shadow of the past lurking behind them but precisely because they are aware that this past leaves no shadow, that this past has been left unsaid, buried and broken, without a signature. The architect and the archaeologist share this passion for the hidden, grey signature that underwrites the mystical, cryptic and necessarily violent foundation of its authority. For Ambedkar, this passion was to always remain directed towards the dark matter of his country’s communal, majoritarian signature, its scaffolds dug deep into the earth like the bones of an extinct species. There could be for him no constitutional architecture, then, without some anti-violent archaeology in it, and there could be no archaeology for him without some architecture of beginnings.

The architect of Greek laws, *rex*, as Arendt recalls, was always an outsider to the city, brought in to compose the civic statutes because he—like the architect of buildings who is concerned with nothing earthly other than the laws of gravity themselves—could disregard the murky complexities of social life and fabricate legal norms that would be almost indifferent to politics (2005, 182–183). If Arendt is right, then Ambedkar is an architect, arguably *the* architect of our time, only in the most paradoxical, Roman sense. This is not only because, unlike the Greek jurist, he sees the democratic constitution acquire its highest political form—its *freedom*—in the crucible of social life (which the Greek legislator strives to avoid) but also because of Ambedkar’s acute judgement about constitutions and their constitutionality itself. In this judgement, being a partisan of moral durability is more fundamental to the task of constitutional—*transcendental*—founding than being simply a guarantor of comforting civilisational stability.

Here, then, is the enigma of Ambedkar, the architect: a figure at once marked by a transcendent exteriority, or an *untouchability*, he might say, and yet, a figure upon whom is inscribed the most granular knowledge of his country’s vicious fallibilities; a figure who bears the weight of these failings very privately, often solitarily, until the very end, on his own body. It is the kind of solitude that attaches either to the grey, meticulous and patient craft of the architect or to the granular precision of the archaeologist. The later Foucault would say, almost in protest, ‘genealogist!’<sup>10</sup> Whatever else he might be judged for, this radical ambiguity in Ambedkar—or revolutionary amphibiousness—is elemental. For Ambedkar’s solitude ensues not only from the soaring flights of his democratic vision and constitutional hope (fitting of an architect) but in equal measure from the telluric—if you will, earth-grazing—gravity of political judgements (fitting of an archaeologist) about a civilisation’s dark matter, its barbarism encrusted as the common law, its dead skin a haunting reminder of the routine, sanctioned decompositions of the human into a thing.

On the surface of it, the architect and the archaeologist rarely meet. They embody two seemingly incommensurable techniques. One draws the lines of a scaffold in the void, while the other digs up everything memory seeks to bury and avoid. One works often against gravity, the other always with it; sometimes they exchange places. They are strung apart at the extremities of that elliptical history and violent arc of human craftsmanship formed over millenia out of a locus of a million points. Each point holds within itself varying laws of and relation between hand and force, flesh and skill, bone and torque. These laws of force and techniques of the hand are themselves neither free of violence nor

devoid of the will to punish, neither untainted by laws of inequality nor unsullied by the humanistic hubris that is jurisprudence.<sup>11</sup>

The first figural appearance of the architect in political thought appears not surprisingly, then, in the realm of jurisprudence as lawgiver: a figure who founds and fabricates, understands stability, and sees power not as license but as limit. The architect is an embodiment of good deeds, a reminder of the human capacity to found despite the cracks on the ground, an exemplar of what Arendt (1958) might call earthly immortality. He is a figure of groundless beginnings, a thinker of gravity who transcends all ground, precedent and lineage, and yet, precisely because he has touched the extreme limits of the possible, he is the closest witness to human finitude.<sup>12</sup>

The archaeologist, on the other hand, bears the memory of human finitude, of earthly mortality—sediments of a civilisation's felony—not as limit (or exception) but as a rule (or the law). Where the architect seeks stability, the archaeologist discerns a stasis. Where the architect is made responsible for beginnings, the archaeologist seeks origins. Where the architect finds materials for founding, the archaeologist discovers bones of species extinct as he rummages the ruins of cities destroyed no less by malice than they were by time. One of the great ironies of modern democratic politics is that its most fanatical enemies first attack ruins of cities long gone, laying even the oldest ruins to ruin anew, sometimes to simply try and find even older ruins underneath: violence against violence, an economy of violence, in other words. The archaeologist is the frontal figure in this assault on democratic truth by fanatics and economists of amnesia, the architect his transcendent other.<sup>13</sup> Both are figures of disappointment, inevitable bearers of a harsh truth, for neither one's passion for beginnings nor the other's love of memory eventually matter to a democracy gone rogue.

Perhaps that is why, in Ambedkar, the architect and the archaeologist perpetually appear—strung apart at their extremities—as equals.<sup>14</sup> To the extent that Ambedkar is now an unavoidable figure in global political thought, a theorist par excellence of disappointment done right, of disappointment done justice, one cannot even be imagined without the other. After all, the architect and the archaeologist do share a common bond with technique, a common quest for the machine, a common love of force. But this is not the force that makes, by unadulterated violence, a thing out of the living. The architect and the archaeologist are invested not so much in the *use of force* as they are artisans of an *imaginary of force*, or pace Benjamin, a *critique of force* (1996). It is at this point, where a revolutionary critique of force cuts into the economy of its use (and abuse) by the state for history, that Ambedkar fearlessly touches the nervous regime of nationalist

amnesia and perjury. It is a point at which an architect's gravity-defying vision—his infinite passion for height, majesty and sovereignty even—bends and meets with the archaeologist's painful discovery of depth at the bottom of the earth, each layer revealing a disappointing inventory of lies, aggravating the solitude of the truth-teller in its utter singularity.

### *Anger and Its Other*

Here, in the architect's recalcitrant solitude and singular fullness, I argue, appears the faculty of political judgement. Political judgement seeks neither a world without crisis nor a subject fully in command of itself (judgement wouldn't be needed in such a flawless world). Quite to the contrary, judgement becomes fully itself—that is, most just, most passionate and most political—precisely in a world of inconsolable disappointment and catastrophic uncertainty, a world where the subject risks losing freedom itself. Only in the throes of disappointment does the self recover and return to itself in all its intensity and hopelessness. It makes itself the first and the last, perhaps the most unforgiving, subject of one's judgement. In disappointment, one judges oneself first (and last). When one judges oneself first, one also forgives the other. 'The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite,' Arendt writes, 'is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly' (1958, 241).

This unforgiving, relentless castigation of the self might produce, every now and then, a certain anger. This anger is an effect, let us mark however, of *self-intensification*. It flows from a self-reflexive individualism, traversing a political path that is set distinctively apart from the nagging sense of self-injury or desolation. A truly political anger is always a function of self-reflexive judgement rather than of the desire to possess for oneself the right to always be proven right. Political judgement is this self-intensification given an emancipatory social form. Such judgement attaches not to rationality (or self-interest) but to the passion of the possible. It speaks in the tone not of impartiality—certainly not 'neutrality'—but of force. Its real centre is not the other but oneself, or better still, oneself as another first. 'I regard my feelings of hatred as a real force,' Ambedkar writes of this force that returns the self always to oneself in his 1943 essay 'Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah.' 'They are only the reflex of the love I bear for the causes I believe in and I am in no way ashamed of it' (1978–2003, 1: 208).<sup>15</sup> I will call this sort of moral transparency in judging the self and the other—oneself as another—the foundations of *democratic anger*, one that is animated by

moral epistemic and clarity rather than by the refusal to examine our suicidal resentments.

Resentment, on the other hand, grows in the isolationist, narcissist chamber of implosive *self-concentration*. Its primary impulse is the indictment of the other. While this punishing verdict against the other might be fuelled by a disdain towards liberal interest, and its demagoguery might be couched in claims of loss of the self and the hubris of disinterest, there is no self-reflexive judgement as such in it. Resentment is the moral psychological point where the self, stewing in its purportedly historic and endlessly unfolding injuries, matters even to itself only insofar as it seeks to appropriate the other into itself, into its circle of implosive—but for that reason, no less dogmatic—vehemence. Every other, especially those closest to oneself, is now merely a thing to be possessed, mastered, defaced.

If anger has democratic responsibility at its heart—‘my response to racism is anger,’ Audre Lorde (1984) writes in the searing first lines of her immortal essay ‘The Uses of Anger’—then resentment has merely a seething desire for tyranny at its source, even if this desire is often couched in archaic myths of descent and purity, and even more perniciously, in snobbish rhetorics and postures of liberal dignity. In fact, the relation between the self’s dignity, on the one hand, and the self-lacerating, fetishistic fuel of resentment, on the other, is both paradoxical and insoluble. For when pushed into an abyss beyond all restitution, it is often the most upright, the most ritualistic and the most monastic self that seeks solace in the defacement and violation of things. Rhetorics of dignity, especially normative ones whose sources are steeped in religious law and liturgy—in classical theatres of mastery and epics of sovereignty even—always risk lapsing or bursting into scenes of resentment.<sup>16</sup> The fetish for retributive violence is merely a step away from this delirious implosion, which launches a stream of indignant brutality against one’s own and oneself.

Resentment is both the self-lacerating relinquishment of self-knowledge—*judgement*—and the toxic effacement of self-interest. Sometimes, it is fuelled by an ascetic phenomenology: a sacrificial relinquishment of the self itself, any trace of self-knowledge now in free fall into the abyss of an elusive purity that this self can seek only in predatory violence against its own. This paradoxical bond between monastic disinterest and suicidal vengeance, both of which require an almost sacrificial concentration of the self into itself—to the extremity that the very border between self-sacrifice and sacrificing the other has blurred—I submit, is the second source of the *postcolonial* self, its movement locked in stasis by the caste contract and its identity lodged in a resentful fetishism of the other.<sup>17</sup>

Yet resentment gnaws not merely at the scaffolds of individualism but at the foundations of civilisation itself. It is a seething infiltration of majoritarian cowardice into politics. It is always, in its opening gambit, a quiet, distant, almost snobbish act, for resentment has no style, no speech, and no language of its own. It might even have an ascetic disinterest in—and disdain for—political freedom itself.

In Nathuram Godse's disfigured self, for instance, this *unwilling freedom*—the resistance to even celebrate the country's independence unequivocally—turns into a *loathing of freedom*. Lacking in language or even speech proper (that is, a speech that might seek to address the minor, the outnumbered and the poor), resentment implodes and metastasises into a monastic and monstrous gesture at once, feeding a stream of slow, silent violence against the minority and the poor. Under conditions of tyranny, this steady, seething stream explodes in a sacrificial delirium, initially simmering and then insinuating itself into the moral fabric of social inequality, which it then painfully exploits to 'make inequality hurt' (Shklar 1984, 87).

It is this *insinuation of inequality into freedom*—an insinuation that is always religious and never non-violent—that Ambedkar warns of in November 1949 in his fabled speech to the Constituent Assembly. The perils of having founded a republic without finding a society is that its morally detached majority, mesmerised by nothing more powerfully than it is with rituals of dignity, an anti-political snobbery even, might not even recognise its loss of freedom when it slides into tyranny the next time. And this slide will happen silently, indifferently and perjurally, with the desire for authoritarianism stretching, or quietly enabled, across divisions of political and existential commitments. Our age, we are frequently told, is 'the age of anger'. The problem is that such expressions do not illuminate much. If anything, they merely deflect us from the archaeological work of excavating the bonds of complicity between liberal grandstanding and fascist competencies. The 'communal majority', as Ambedkar calls it in the 1940s, is a figure in this genealogy of authoritarian desire and fascist competence, underwritten by the theologico-juridical sources of the modern self. There is not a trace of democratic anger or judgement in it, just a calm calculus that scaffolds the majoritarian will to punish.

There is a very difficult, patient, grey distinction to be maintained, then, between anger and resentment based on their motivations and effects. The anger of a Bhimrao Ambedkar or a Frantz Fanon is militantly different from the calm, ascetic rage of a Nathuram Godse. A revolutionary's anger is easy to denounce. One thinks here of more than one Brahmin theorist conceding he finds Ambedkar 'difficult to teach' because of his anger, which ironically is Ambedkar's very point:

his is a *difficult freedom* precisely because it is easy to hunt it down and tough to love.

Revolutionary anger is, by its very nature, a speech act with its own linguistic inventory, theatrical presence and rhetorical flourish. Its *signature* is its passionate anguish. Its lucid disappointment cuts through the majority's counter-revolutionary stasis like a sententious scalpel. Like an architect's fearless pencil cruising through the void, this anger seeks to begin again, even if only to be disappointed again. Yet in radical disappointment, 'not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated,' Baldwin writes of this indefatigable, anti-ascetic politics in the 1979 novel *Just above My Head*, his last (2000, 420). 'If one refuses abdication, one begins again' (Glaude Jr. 2020, 23). 'The dream was repudiated: so be it' (Baldwin 2000, 420).

### *Majesties of Judgement*

Ambedkar understood that in a social universe in which majoritarian impulses festered in utter disregard of constitutional sanctions and in utter excess of their electoral mandate, disappointment could not be left to become the antithesis of democratic participation. Instead, disappointment must be embraced as the disobedient soul of political citizenship, a political friendship even (which he called *maitri*, often leaving it untranslated in his English writings), mounted on a refusal of dejection. Disappointment, for Ambedkar, is not the exhaustion of democratic promise. Instead, precisely because it is so perennial, it becomes a durable scaffold of the democracy still to come. This indefatigable attachment to one's own deep disappointment—but let us note, *a disappointment without desolation*—requires a faculty, a lesson and a craft, above all, of political judgement.

Without this judgement, disappointment turns into mere dejection, the involution of collective defeat into resentments of oneself for one's own self alone. How deeply must the Hindu fanatic despise himself, one can ask in Ambedkar's wake, to be able to hate even those that he and his ilk so resoundingly outnumber? Given this numerical and unforgiving dominance, 'how fatal,' Ambedkar asks in his theory of the 'communal deadlock,' must it be to dissent against this fanatical majority, let alone 'destroy' it? (1978–2003, 1: 377). For our purposes here, the question is more archaeological. How does one appropriate a figure who embraces that very thing, political disappointment, that his enemies accuse him of? This question has been posed in the history of political thought only for the architects of the laws, who, the Greeks believed, must always come from outside the city and must not belong. The architect, by the

very nature of the craft, by the very dint of his recalcitrant work with force and forces, must be inappropriable.

In political judgement at its most rigorous, most truthful, most upright and most democratic above all, on the other hand, to modulate Paul Ricoeur's expression, one institutes the capacity to look at oneself as wholly another (2014). And because this self is now wholly given to the other (not as empathy or appropriation but as the irreducibility of identity), the freedom of the self now becomes, before everything else, the freedom of others. It is a sort of 'reflexive individualism' without which no revolution in norms, no fraternity of citizens, no politics of friendship and, above all, no equality of freedom is possible. Perhaps, the bearer of this individualism is always the exile, the outsider stranger to oneself, a soul that is a sum of its force field: in sum, the architect. The body of the architect out of whose hands the spirit of the laws is born remains forever marked by its inappropriable gravity, a transcendent exteriority. Unlike the curves of the artifice to which his hands give shape, the lines of the architect's force remain invisible, unseen, untouchable even.

Stranger to his own afterlife, Ambedkar was always hesitant to see himself as the architect of the world's longest written national constitution, disappointed as he remained with its majoritarian subterfuge. Yet it is precisely the moral reserve of the architect in him that mandates that an archaeology of this resolutely constitutional disappointment be undertaken, that its radical solitude be saved from nationalist condescension, and that disappointment itself, with its indefatigable intensity for justice, be reinscribed at the heart of a fraternally bound constitutional commitment. For in this disappointment of the architect, who, despite his moral anger, never crosses the rigorous limit and line of political and judicial constitutionality, lies not an inconsolable rage—one that consumes the modern majority—but instead, a profound theory of democratic judgement at whose empty centre is always, for Ambedkar, the outnumbered minor facing the full might of 'police power' and violence of the law (1978–2003, 5: 283).<sup>18</sup>

The unforgettable warning Ambedkar issues in the Constituent Assembly in November 1949 as he presents the 'Motion on the Draft Constitution' centres on the 'peril' of this extraconstitutional, asymmetrical, and unforgiving violence. 'How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions?' he asks the Assembly (1978–2003, 13: 1216):

How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this

contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which is Assembly has to laboriously built up.

Left to fester, this slow entrenchment of inequality and vengeance might unleash a new age of violence against violence, a nihilistic ‘grammar of anarchy’ (1978–2003, 13: 1215). To compound the tragedy singular to caste society, this lawlessness would be no less Brahminic, no less marked by delusions of purity, and no less constituted by disdain for life and the living, even though its footsoldiers would barely be Brahmins by birth anymore. They would come from all castes, lured by the suicidal logic and the sacrificial apparatus—*dispositif*—that is Brahminism. The only antidote to this Brahminic nihilism is a ‘recognition of the principle of fraternity...a sense of common brotherhood...[a desire to imbue] solidarity to social life.’ Ambedkar closes, ‘it is a difficult thing’, this fraternally shared freedom of equals (1978–2003, 13: 1217).

Republics often risk losing their freedom, or worse, simply fail to keep it, if they delude themselves into believing—or lie about their belief—that their constitutions will save them from tyranny. Constitutions do not save republics; they only begin it (and that too with violence).<sup>19</sup> The durability of democratic politics, in Ambedkar’s ‘judgement’, had nothing to do with its hubristic claim to stability. Caste, after all, has always seemed most stable to the technicians of nationalist discipline and accountants of public sacrifice. But the political forms it gives rise to have not yet yielded a durable freedom. Stilted as its foundations are on the soft clay of a republic’s collective lying, the seemingly stable but vehement caste contract, with all its sanctions and coercions, might give in sooner than we might think to the ultra-majority’s barely repressed tyrannical dream.

‘It is perfectly possible to pervert the Constitution,’ he reminds the assembly of his peers, ‘without changing its form by merely changing the form of the administration’ (Ambedkar 2002, 484–485). What prevents this perversion is not the artifice of the law but the cultivation of constitutional morals. This requires patient work, for constitutional morality is ‘not a natural sentiment’ and, prophetically, he adds, ‘our people have yet to learn it’ (484–485). The work here is not the sentimental task of simply *willing*; it is the rigorous craft of *judging*. What Ambedkar calls ‘constitutional morality’ is perhaps the democratic counterpart, the only durable moral scaffold, of political judgement. Both are proper to the citizen, he cautions, but neither is natural to him. Both must be cultivated, but neither can be fabricated.<sup>20</sup>

Judgement, as word and concept, appears close to two dozen times in Ambedkar's interventions throughout the long deliberations of India's Constituent Assembly. Yet it must perhaps be a sign of the profound constitutional gravity that he assigns this word—which is to say, the primacy of the power of judgement in constitutional democracy—that he uses it just once in his most focused, philosophical meditation on constitutional morality itself, placing his own self—'In my judgement,' he affirms—at the centre of it. It is a singular use of a word so singular in its power and yet so elusive in its intricacy that, interrupted by death, even Arendt (1992) left her path through Kant's third *Critique* (2000) unfinished.

In Ambedkar's theory and critique of judgement, the concept comes alive precisely because of the hostility that surrounds his personhood. In him, judgement comes to be marked by a thinker's singular solitude in the midst of a frequently hostile assembly of peers that was India's Constituent Assembly. For all that, however, let us note that the word is used in a radically impolitic and profoundly untimely—which is not to say, ill-judged—manner. Where others bask in the reflected republican glory of a new founding, using the constitution to gloss over their deceptions and silences, the architect sees fissures of violence and cracks of perjury in the foundation. What seems most stable to the wilful eye of the nationalist is for the architect not the most durable. Nothing dissolves majoritarian hubris and its insatiable appetite for appropriating everything for itself more powerfully than this demythologised truth about our constitutional fragility, perfected by a truth-teller who found himself, as if by will, roundly outnumbered and singularly inappropriable.

Seven years later, this devastating sense of feeling 'outnumbered' reappears in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, where an anti-war Siddharth, reduced to minority among the tribal war hawks willing to kill their neighbours over water, leaves the assembly in disappointment, only to later become the Buddha. Ambedkar's declaration of radical antinomy, which can be read as 'I am *not a part* of the whole. [But] I am [still] *a part* [of the whole, if only] *apart* [from the whole]', restages for its time the inimitably succinct definition of the homeless, derelict proletariat of *The Communist Manifesto* (1978–2003, 10: 166). There, as Étienne Balibar points out, Marx, in an equally brutal truth statement, calls the proletariat 'a class that is not a class of society' (2017, 148). The visceral antinomy here lies in the subject body of a class that, by its very name, is produced by a society within itself for itself. Yet this lonely class on the edges of nothingness, or at the end of time (*antjya*), never becomes a constituent of the society's self-representation, let alone its self-determination. This, perhaps, is also the tragic antinomy—the

sovereign void—that lies at the heart of Ambedkar’s revolutionary constitutionalism, fuelled in the 1940s by his verdict against any form of parliamentary democracy that chooses self-determination (and self-presentation) over the radical equality of its shared freedom.

The one comment most widely attributed to Ambedkar, ‘Gandhiji, I have no homeland’, must itself be understood in this militant context: not as Ambedkar’s expression of the self’s insufferable alienation from country, but instead, the self’s revolutionary embrace of emptiness, its civic and disobedient recusal from participating in the logic of the caste contract now burnished, even more coercively, by the glories by India’s anticolonial triumph. This recusal involves for Ambedkar, at the same time, tracing the silhouettes of a future subject that is as yet empty—fitting of *The Communist Manifesto*, where Marx says similarly of the proletariat hemmed in by predatory nationalism, ‘The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got’ (Marx, 2002, 41). If there is one event in the postcolonial world that might have seared the fact of this homelessness of the minority, the poor, and the outcaste upon nationalist consciousness, it was the one that appeared on its horizon in the immediate aftermath of the most radical judgement Ambedkar had ever made: making public his will to conversion. Instead, what followed was an epistemic stasis, a long winter for political faith that was now quarantined behind secularist etiquette, upon which grew a republic’s founding, malignant hostility not only to conversion but to interrogations of its secularist snobbery—its punishing will to make inequality hurt—as such.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Majoritarian Signature*

A civilisational resentment towards conversion drives the wilful nationalist misreading of Ambedkar’s conception of the religious, and thus, of the mythology of his turn towards it. This is ironic, given the fact that the structure of political justice within which Ambedkar posits the conditions for the annihilation of caste, ‘the religious’ is not a figure of outright hostility, even if for him all hostilities ensue fundamentally from the communal appetite for sacrifice that religious traditions nourish in them. The religious temptation is the most archaic site of the law and right, which also makes it an ineluctable presence in any modern attempt to theorise equality and, most inextricably of all, for Ambedkar, political responsibility.

‘The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be Religion, as it kills responsibility, which is the essence of a truly religious act,’ goes that incandescent formula in a pivotal passage of *Annihilation of Caste*.

‘I have, therefore, no hesitation in saying that such a religion must be destroyed and I say, there is nothing irreligious in working for the destruction of such a religion... to remove the misrepresentation that is caused by misnaming this Law as Religion’ (1944, 87–88). To be responsible for the law requires an architect to demythologise the law’s punitive will, in other words, the will that hides behind the religious and takes its name. Religion is simply the willful ‘misrepresentation’—or misnamed double—of the law. Together, they constitute the theologico-juridical will to punish.

To speak of the religious as an architecture for a revolutionary’s moral and political responsibility, as Ambedkar does here, however, is not to reduce revolution to theology. Quite to the contrary, it is to exit the inheritance of the passive, indifferent wretchedness that religiosity, in its sly civility, bestows upon the citizen. It is to reject the most ordinary theological demand that rituals of authority and obedience make on citizens: that they must abdicate all responsibility in the name of ascetic disinterest. It is to accept, above all, that any idiom and concept of responsibility as such must grapple first with the contagious presence of the theologico-juridical impasse before it overcomes the obdurate power of its stasis. If *Annihilation of Caste* is a treatise on that exemplary structure of political faith that alone might make possible the destruction of caste, it is so only because it is also a manifesto on the architecture of—*how not to abdicate*—political responsibility, how not to lose faith in equality and how not to sleepwalk into tyranny.

The inverse of this responsibility is abdication with an ascetic masquerade: the self-alienating precondition of India’s ‘armed neutrality’, a war India wages with and against itself in its vicious passivity (1978–2003, 1: 64). It is a war that does not simply refuse to host strangers but also produces and reproduces strangers in its very midst. It is a strife, in other words, whose brutal logjam—or ‘deadlock’—is at once reproducible and mutant, different in what it yields (and the desolation it leaves behind) every single time. Caste society is not stagnant or timeless in any simple sense, contrary to Orientalist and liberal claims about it then. Caste is the theft of time itself. What I have called the ‘caste contract’ is the punitive, theologico-juridical structure that enables this mutation—the ineluctable morphing of self-determination into the majoritarian will to total domination—and renders majoritarian habits of moral and political cruelty unpunishable. Of this unforgiving contract, caste is neither simply a juridical home nor just a theological origin nor, above all, only a sacrificial limit. Instead, precisely because it is all three, caste is an exemplary figure in the ordinary, even universal logic of violence as such.

In that sense, the paradox of what Ambedkar frames as the ‘Indian political’ (1941), right in the subtitle of *Thoughts on Pakistan*, composed on the eve of the subcontinent’s independence from colonial rule, is also its most classical: obdurate in its logic and banal in its evil. An entire system of laws, rituals, office and duty—dharma—is built upon the contract whose very purpose is to make caste disappear in plain sight, rendering it unspoken and unsayable. It is a system policed and reinforced by a complex nexus of sacrificial obligations, disciplinary sanctions, and punitive limits (*maryada*), whose very use is to quarantine the human from the worldly, which is to say, sequester force from the collective pulse and impulse of the political itself.

One cannot comprehend the coercive, vehement stability of the caste contract unless one grasps, with Ambedkar, this dynamic—or vacillating—nexus between theology and government, between asceticism and disdain, one that reproduces itself through technologies of denial. That is, it lives on by denying that it exists at all, either as theology or as government. Dharma, one might still be told with a straight face by those who love to deface Ambedkar, is neither this nor that (*neti neti*). This is why caste can be wholly archaic in its juridical structure and wholly modern in its conceptual jargon for in its structure and its reproducibility—its *historicity*, if you will—it resembles both a machine and a mutant. Ancient as a technique of rule, it can mutate seamlessly into the art of modern government as its classical economy of sacrifice pivots around republican virtuosity and its debts—incurred by simply being born—are paid in deliriums of masculine duty. Caste does not exist, neither as racial apartheid nor, as Ambedkar puts it, as a settler colonial regime of ‘barbed wire’ (1978–2003, 1: 68). Caste is a ‘notion’, the *wholly other of segregation*, a bottomless relation of absolute wrong that leaves no footprints on the ground.

Perhaps, beneath its irrepressible rhythm as a democratic manifesto on freedom or as a radiant call to revolutionary intelligence, *Annihilation of Caste* is most fundamentally a treatise on the moral psychology of the modern majoritarian signature itself, a patient deconstruction of what Ambedkar insistently calls, including at a decisive moment in his discussion of stasis and war, the ‘wrong’. Two threads are woven around his archaeology of the wrong. The first is that which he calls the ‘wrong relationship’, which takes the phenomenology of everyday ‘indifference’ and ‘insult’ and turns them into habits of moral cruelty with legal sanction—or judicial disdain—behind them (1978–2003, 1: 55). This relation of exhaustive—and inexhaustible—wrongs, by its very name, compresses an endless strife between the self and the other. Caste is also a war of the self; being of a caste—let alone outcaste—is

being at war with oneself. For at its source is the law of individual and generational time, one that keeps clamped in place the blood-bound logic of social reproduction, succession and inheritance.

The second is that which Ambedkar calls the wrong ‘worse than cruelty’ (1978–2003, 1: 54), at whose heart is the invisible, almost mystical foundation of authority, its cruelties and meanness, its misanthropy and snobbery, all made permissible by the moving centres and porous borders of the theologico-juridical apparatus. The ‘worse’ here, for Ambedkar, is not the extreme violence of the wrong; it is its cruelty rendered *unpunishable*. In fact, cruelty can exist and recur only in some relation to the law, the norm even, even if this relation is in itself lawless and devoid of any purpose or *telos*. This apparatus, freed from moral constraint and temporal measure, extracts a price (or simply blood) either in the form of property, pain, restitution, or sacrifice. Ambedkar’s formidable recuperation of the notion of what Marx calls the ‘absolute wrong’ takes us back again, as Étienne Balibar reminds us, to the ‘messianic moment in Marx’ (2017, 146), a constellation around the ‘wrong’ to which Hegel too belongs.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever its time, the injustice of and, most ineradicably, the injustice in caste is a wreckage of the human form beyond salvage. Caste can never be made just. Stronger still, there is no justice in any theory or promise of politics worthy of its name that privileges caste for its stability (which it purportedly lends). This is so not because caste is an irreducibly religious form with excessive political effects—such a malaise is constitutive of modernity at large—but because there is not a trace of truth around it, there can be no place for truth in it, nobody speaks the truth about it, and above all, it shall never yield to the gravity of truth without ceasing to be. Caste is the sovereign mode of being in denial about the basis of the world itself. ‘Like a weed on the surface of a pond,’ a twenty-five-year-old Ambedkar writes as early as 1916, ‘it just hangs there to this day without support’ (1978–2003, 1: 19–20). To annihilate caste then is to rethink gravity, to reclaim earth from its wretchedness, and to reposit not merely the human but force itself. Perhaps, the first post-caste subject will be an empty subject, a bearer of finitude who, like an architect, has touched the void (*sunnyata*).

Caste need not always be indicted for India’s murderous consent, defenders of civilisational virtue say. Majoritarian indifference of such subcontinental scale cannot be blamed on caste alone either, they add. Above all, the causes of this stoic malaise, this mass of humanity unmoved by its own self-lacerating cruelty, can never be directly traced back to caste (*nothing can ever directly be traced back to caste*, which is its very point). Yet for all the claims of civilisational good faith, the truth is that the majority’s electoral indifference—the *refusal*

*of the majority to vote the vandal out of power*—resembles a rehearsed, reiterative, recursive and habitual disdain towards inequality and the unequal, fuelled by a silent enchantment with extreme power and a desolate love of tyranny that can have grown only in the monstrous excess of the caste contract. Caste requires a contract, a consent by subjection, not because it is violence by ordinary means for common ends but because it is a primordial, originary and cruel wrong. Its violence involves not blood sacrifice but moral cruelty, the infiltration of barbarity into non-violence itself. This, in fact, is Ambedkar's moral challenge (and his ethical demand): to salvage freedom for a swathe of humanity—the largest democracy in the Global South—where the majority has not only blurred, systematically and through recursive practice, the line between non-violence and vengeance but also uses one for the other.

If there is, in liberal democracy, a *majoritarian signature*, that is, the shape that a people's democratic mentality acquires in practical situations and that underwrites and gives form to its social contract, then caste is its unmoving stylistic scaffold, one that resembles, in all its normative features, the modern contract itself. I draw and modulate the expression, most obviously, from the works of Charles Mills (1999) and Carole Pateman (1988). I do so not only because caste shares devastating adjacencies with racism, with an equally voracious appetite for inequality rooted in communal misogyny, but also because the caste contract, insofar as its consent is anchored in violence before time, cannot flourish without a misogynistic control of reproductive rights and bodies. It is not coincidence either that the logic of the death penalty—the systemic, unforgiving use of the law for vengeance—is as fundamental to the caste contract (and to the constitutional tradition founded upon it) as it was to the system of Atlantic slavery (and the jurisprudence of American neglect that grew out of it).

What secures a majority's consent to such regimes for the use and abuse of bodies so that it acquires the normative shape of a contract? In the constellation of theorists grappling with this problem, Judith Shklar is among the rarest in the Euro-American liberal tradition to explicitly use 'Indo-European caste society'—at times, she substitutes it with an even more sacrificial term 'warrior society'—as a symptomatic expression of the continued tolerance of cruelty among urbane liberals who excuse its viciousness in the name of cultural particularity. 'To the extent that the European past is utterly hostile to freedom and that the most ancient of Indo-European traditions is the caste society, liberals must reject particular traditions,' Shklar writes in 'The Liberalism of Fear' (1989, 25–26). 'No society that still has

traces of the old tripartite division of humanity into those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor can be liberal.'

By way of a beginning to supplement and complete Shklar's powerful critique of fear, let us simply note that India, whether or not it calls itself liberal, has more than just a systemic trace of caste in it. Caste is what gives political cruelty in India—but not only in India—both a morally palatable aesthetic and a tactically deployable form, making violence against life look like monastic disinterest and turning ascetic selflessness towards the world into a licentiousness to make inequality hurt. Its web of consent and indifference makes active, unapologetic neglect of the living and the alive—the still breathing—look like mere disenchantment from the world. Not political enmity, then, but the majority's obtuse viciousness and its civil, cultivated withdrawal from the politics of life—and species—underwrites the logic of its compulsive, hostile cruelty.

### *Afterlife*

'Who were the Shudras?' Ambedkar asks in his most archaeological work of the same name (1946), as he finally begins to draw, in the final decade of his life, the silhouette of his philosophical method. He had set out this time not simply to excavate the remnants of India's deep history of inhumanity, which had not gone missing anywhere anyway. Having survived for centuries in the obdurate laws and unforgiving practices of social untouchability, its tentacles spread across entire lifespans of political regimes and legal systems. In New York, in his youth, he had examined its surfaces, its deceptive fluidity that hid an epochal stasis, its stillness free from the laws of moral gravity like 'weed on the surface of a pond' (1978–2003, 1: 19–20). Now, three decades later, he had decided it was time to disinter the subterranean and labyrinthine textual underwire of India's most ordinary vices and indifference to human life that it yielded. It was time to painstakingly examine the grammatical structure and lyrical verse of that exemplary moral wrong, that ordinary act of perjury, in other words, one in which a vicious, silent disdain had come to hold together and legitimise a civilisational fable of epic virtuosity, ascetic disinterest and self-righteous non-violence.

The task was as intensely literary as it was philosophical. Ambedkar recognised that the questions raised by the structure of this enduring moral cruelty—the making lawful of lawlessness through quiet, repetitive disparagement of those born unequal and a pernicious, oblivious disregard of that which is visibly human—were so stark and dark that no single gesture, no *law of genre*, might alone be adequate to its ask. How could an anti-imperial humanism so righteous as India's

continue to sit so imperiously on the history of its own dogmatic and inhumane barbarism? What sort of a human, let alone *political*, subject might such a morally inert and cruel humanism eventually yield? What would really become of and come after the anti-colonial subject? For a society so enamoured by rituals of power (and its priests) that a majority in it was willing to live on in desolate powerlessness and voluntary servitude without end, if only in wait for its own merciless chance at domination, how long would it really take for this majority to turn against itself and fabricate enemies from among its own once an alien colonial power had vacated its shores?

Following Engels, Ambedkar frames in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*—the title of his manuscript itself a tribute to Engels' *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany* (1851–1855)—this suicidal play between power and powerlessness, desire and disinterest, as a fatal struggle between forces of revolution and counter-revolution in which hermeneutics has always played a decisive, if surreptitious, role. The counter-revolution, Ambedkar warns in 'Krishna and His Gita', is never simply a sacrificial war (1978–2003, 3: 357–380). It is the silent, seething stasis of interpretations at war, one in which texts and monuments are brought alive, if only to be ruined; it is the 'legislation of fratricide', a jurisprudence through which the living are reduced, by pure violence, to things (Kumar 2010).

This play has been staged relentlessly in different guises since Indian antiquity. It is not a timeless essence, this Indian thing with cruelty in it, Ambedkar is careful to posit. Rather, it is a structure, an apparatus or *dispositif*, a shape-shifting contract between the ruler and the ruled in which they might even deceptively exchange places. *Varnadharmā*—the punitive regime of caste life bound by religious sanction—is not incidental but fundamental to this theatre of contractual cruelty, even if the liturgical drama between Brahmin power and Kshatriya counter-power has often given this brute stasis an opulent masquerade. Beginning with the earliest fratricidal strife of statecraft and their textual traces (of which the Gita is one poetic testimony), the Indian notion of the human—deficient as it is—has been inextricable from the subcontinent's elaborately codified 'caste contract', even and especially when the truth of this contract is obscured in a mire of untranslatable terms.<sup>23</sup>

The deconstruction of this seemingly bloodless, obstinately contractual paradox requires a forensic commitment, a work of legal and scriptural 'paleontology' (1978–2003, 7: 244). On the one hand, the bones of species left extinct by the sheer weight of India's urbane, smug forgetfulness, their cries of survival drowned in the breathless chanting of Brahminic liturgy (now backed even more ferociously by the apparatus

of judicial disregard for right and life), need to be strung together again. On the other hand, the spine of a classical archive—statutes spread physically across a subcontinent, threaded through thousands of texts, a million verses and uncountable myths of unforgiving punishment, trans-generational rage, and petty jealousies that saturate its epics—must be audaciously broken to recover a breathing, unbroken humanity again. This is a work not simply of history, Ambedkar insists, but of moral and political ‘archaeology’, and *The Untouchables* is, he declares in a dazzling moment that returns to the constitutive relation between aesthetic and political judgement—*aesthetic judgement as political judgement*—a ‘work of art’ (1978–2003, 7: 244).

History cannot always tell us why or when a society might be tempted to suicidally jump into the abhorrent depths of hatred that it has slyly concealed for so long, even if it has never ceased digging itself into this abyss. History cannot always tell us how to decipher the code of this compulsive, collective brutality when its moment has finally arrived, its nihilistic script made unmistakably legible to even those who had hoped their walls, built on delusional islands of snobbery and guarded by mythological banisters of civility, would be too high for the zealots to scale. Indeed, liberal purveyors of India’s nationalist history have always told its people otherwise: zealots shall never manage to scale the walls and domes of our faith because *their* religion will not allow them to, for *their* religion is a religion of non-violence. Until they do climb the walls in the very name of *their* religion, crawling to the top of the dome—metaphorically and literally—with sickles and sticks in a slow and genocidal preparation.

This crude, blunt and archaic slowness is the very essence of majoritarian misanthropy. Often, the suicidal temptation to destroy everything that has life in it appears on the modern political horizon slowly and grindingly, hesitatingly even. It appears not always in a homicidal burst of spectacular violence, although such delirium has always lurked in the corners of the oldest Indic verses. It is instead filtered through a millennium of ritualised, practised neglect of the vulnerable, the outcast, the minor, the missing, the undercounted and the unreported. The bearer of this seething, destructive suicide is not a mass of devout fanatics but the completely withdrawn individual whose time passes with only himself, his own self. In that sense, the system of belief that undergirds the silent, ‘communal majority’—with its unwavering will to punish—as Ambedkar extracts this figure, is only theological liberalism without the normative pretense; it is civilisational liturgy without moral value or political faith. It is at once government and indiscipline, at once lawlessness and technocracy. When did lawlessness become the law? ‘Why is lawlessness lawful?’ Ambedkar,

the archaeologist, asks of the juridical archive, staring into the future of a civilisation's scriptural past even as he reads its verses painstakingly (1978–2003, 5, 62–74). He sees a future when the very border between persons and things, the living and the non-living, might be blurred in the very shadow of that intricate theologico-juridical tradition.

### *Denials of Persons and Things*

This violence is slow, curated in neglect. Hatred does not lay monuments and cities to ruin overnight; it gnaws and digs into the self-righteous foundations of belief slowly, pulverising it into a decrepit submission under a fanaticism of all against all. Walls of urbane civility are mere banisters in front of the fanatical zeal that now speaks in the tongue of collective, sacrificial monasticism, in tones of a punishing vegetarianism even.

It is not a coincidence that the sacred figure of the cow appears in the most decisive passage of Nathuram Godse's confessional text on his assassination of Gandhi, its author furious at Gandhi's obstinate refusal to support a legislative ban on 'cow slaughter', even though, Godse seethes, 'Gandhiji could display the most vehement desire for the protection of the cow' (Godse 1993, 75). Symptomatically, the ferocity of this punitive, zoophilic Brahminism is unleashed not by Gandhi's refusal to privilege cattle over the Muslim, but instead, because the latter had also dared to see the animal and the neighbour as equals.

This strange bond between Brahminism and satyagraha is forged around their shared trouble with equality, but it comes to be decidedly tied around the artifice of dignity that both attach to vegetarianism, if only in varying degrees of dogmatic vehemence. This shared obsession with the animal—or beast—has always been a battle of perversity against perversity, a war between two visions of right and renunciation, centred unforgivingly on the self and its voluntary abstinences and desires (or the pathology of self-interest that posits itself as disinterest). In both Brahminism and satyagraha, this abstinent, celibate vehemence resolves itself (but) differently, incommensurably even. Brahminism deploys the semantic rage of popular sovereignty, satyagraha expresses a poetic disinterest in sovereign power. Yet the violent circuit of the dogma passes in both, *separately*, through a sacrificial indifference towards life that stains the democratic mentality indelibly. In a caste society where claims of dignity are indissociable from archaic rituals of power and resentment, as Ambedkar writes in a passage of diagnostic brilliance unparalleled in global democratic thought (1978–2003, 1: 377),

it turns a political mass into a 'communal majority' that simply will not accept disappointment as an inevitable fact of the common life.

This perversion is not new, even if the bloodshot vision fuelling Godse's testimony crystallises it with unprecedented clarity. If anything, this counter-revolutionary refusal to begin again, the refusal to let go of the belief that the majority must never be disappointed, stains the majority's communal sense of self at its inception. Its life-taking codes of honour were written at the very beginning of time in the purest language known to man, mounted on a grammar that was indissociable from the theory of dignity in the monarchical and monastic traditions alike. There is something truly archaic about that moment when modern, bourgeois civility meets classically learned orthodoxy, which is what Ambedkar might have meant by the term *counter-revolution*.

The emergence of nationalism in the late 19th century in Bombay and the Punjab, its surge fanned by rhetorics of cow protection, were loaded with this counter-revolutionary learnedness. Only now, it was made headier and legitimised by the emerging anti-colonial rhetoric of *swaraj*. Its most debilitating effect was that such a rhetoric simply left unquestioned—and eventually, rendered impenetrable—the developing bond between classical compulsions of Brahminic non-violence and modern spaces and political theories for majoritarian vengeance. To read the signs of this timeless compulsion demands not just Sanskrit—Ambedkar's formidable work on a Pali dictionary of the Ashokan universe was not incidental—but a politics of radical anti-amnesia.

This politics of radical anti-amnesia is what Ambedkar calls 'paleontology'. Its craft entails not just a recovery of ruins lost and forgotten but also a probing, painstaking work on the *structure* of forgetting. The subject here is not the 'fraction' that is forgotten but the 'millions' who are enablers of this amnesia. To a paleontologist, it is not simply that which is classical, dated and archaic that must be resuscitated. It is also that which is recent, modern, new even, but which insinuates itself into antiquity as if it always belonged there. Amnesia, after all, is not simply a forgetfulness of facts. It is also making classical, even quasi-transcendental, that which is manufactured, fabricated and mired in interest but pretends otherwise. Just as the moral stability of political foundations, especially constitutional foundations, needs an architect's refusal to yield to power, radical anti-amnesia requires the refusal of an archaeologist to let felony masquerade as civilisation as its cruelty slides into oblivion. It demands, above all, as Ambedkar publicly declares in 1925, a will to mastery (of texts) again. 'We should either burn down these scriptures and *turn them to ashes*,' he proposes, '*or master them* and falsify the rules that teach untouchability' (Kumar

2018, 174). There is no annihilation without some faith in it, then, and no political faith without the will to annihilation in it.

Yet, so understated is this anti-caste rigour (anti-caste truth as philosophical archaeology) in contemporary political thought that it must be posited, again and again, not only as the irrefutable principle of modern democratic life but also as the axiomatic theorem of political philosophy as such.<sup>24</sup> Why is this philosophical move so important for Ambedkar (and for us, in his wake)? The reason is that while philosophy, he writes, pursues truth, somewhere down the line, it *forgets* how to love truth. This forgetting of the love of truth, which might have been the foundation of *justice* or *maitri*, and the institution in its place of punitive fear as the logic of rule is the soul of the Brahminic ‘counter-revolution’ of classical India and of its epistemic regime. The sophistication of the counter-revolutionary discipline(s) paradoxically means that the desire to bring truth back to political thought would itself require a series of *philosophical* gestures, of which the *anti-caste gesture* would form the ‘revolutionary’ heart. There is, for Ambedkar, no way to bring philosophy back to truth (and truth back to philosophy) other than by patiently, meticulously, rigorously destroying the textual *dispositif* of caste. For it is here, in philosophical silence—in the theologies of the *unsayable*—that the perjury of a civilisation thrives. Does the deferral of this epistemological demand lie at the foundations of the Indian ‘evasion’ of political philosophy?<sup>25</sup>

The converse is thus equally true. Anti-caste philosophy must be an act of philosophical anti-amnesia. There is a reason why Ambedkar was always willing to forgive but never quick to forget. Let us think, quickly, of the Poona Pact of September 1932, for instance, where he surrenders his political conviction to Gandhi’s sacrificial theatre. That moral tragedy—and farce—of the pact he recounts throughout the 1940s in a string of works. For to forget that betrayal of justice would be an unforgivable treachery against history itself. On the other hand, to not forgive a ‘saint’ would simply amount to replicating the structure of caste sacrifice and its history of retributive violence. That is the aporia of the figure of the architect: it knows how to forgive but it cannot afford to forget. It yields to gravity but cannot yield to amnesia.

### *The Sovereign Void*

No metaphor or *figure* has marked Ambedkar’s itinerary as a thinker with greater force than that of the ‘architect’. While inadequate to the gravity of his constitutional vision, this figural attribution is not wholly unjust in its own right. At least in Roman political thought (a tradition

that in Ambedkar's own oeuvre is brought to intersect radically with Buddhist epistemology), the inventiveness of the constitutionalist has often been strongly identified with the exactitude of the architect. Both exemplify the precision of a dexterous craftsman: the constitutionalist imagines the power of laws without precedent just as the architect visualises lines of force in the emptiness of space. Both see contours that are invisible to the ordinary citizen in the sometimes thin, often dense, and almost always abrasive air of gravitational fields and social strife. Both work in the radical emptiness of the void, beginning with nothing other than force at its very inception.

Among all sorts of craftsmen, ancient and modern, why is it that the architect has come so squarely to belong to politics, so frequently invoked in the history of political thought, in a manner that another craftsman who works as routinely and as intricately with force—engineer, electrician, metallurgist, mathematician, surgeon—is simply not? What makes architecture yield to politics? And what pushes politics to yield to the figure of the architect? Of Ambedkar, the constitutional theorist and moral thinker par excellence, one who has come to be sovereign among all the architects of the Southern constitutional tradition that appeared on the global horizon in the decades after decolonisation in Asia and Africa, this much can be said even more forcefully: Ambedkar does not simply inhabit this classical fable of jurisprudence. He redraws its silhouette. He does not simply burnish the laws of state. He burns them with an infinite passion for the possible.

Perhaps Ambedkar is, if he is an architect at all, a thinker less interested in the strictures of history (or the illuminations of theology) than he is in the transcendent gravity of democratic truth. For Ambedkar, this gravity—which is a force so minor, so impenetrable, and yet so insurmountable that it is a perfect example of nonforce—comes from the courage of those truth-tellers who see in it (and know that truth always carries) the seeds of a transcendent, even luminous, disappointment. What is an architect if not this figure who works with the gravity of truth in the face of its very disappointment? For disappointment—even 'repudiation,' pace Baldwin—there will be. As Judith Shklar cautions, 'Because political hypocrisy is part of the rhetoric of legitimization and of the politics of persuasion, there is an uneasy fear of fraud and dissimulation in liberal democracies' (1984, 75). This explains why 'democracy generates disappointment, and a sense of being deceived' (75).

On the one hand, there is the more visible, more palpable affliction on the surface of this disappointment that Ambedkar bore on his skin: the exhaustion of India's fabled commitment to liberal and secular values, which has involved a calculated, steady destruction of political faith and

the destruction of faith in politics—a ‘love of truth’—itself. The covenant of self-determination that bound a people together in a simple act of trust after its struggle against the empire, the constitutional belief that the majority will always truthfully decide what is best for the liberty of all, seems to have been stretched to its depoliticising, brutal seams. On the other hand, there is the more oblique, more tacit and more urbane pathology that drives India’s megacity brutalism: a wilful denialism and cultivated indifference towards social inequality and material dispossession in cities and farm country alike (of which the stasis between insurgent farmer protests and despondent farmer suicides is but one symptom). A denialism—*moral cruelty*—has reduced people to things through systemic and legalised neglect, rendering any talk, let alone any collective vision, of moral life subject to scornful scepticism, resentful cynicism, and nihilism even, so that truth and truthfulness themselves have lost their gravity. If Ambedkar’s vision for the future seems fragile today, it is at this point: time has wilted his hope in the city as a place of refuge.

My question to begin with was quite simple. What is an architect, if Ambedkar is one at all? And what is it not? Firstly, in the most obvious sense, we can now say, the architect is a *figure*: a node in a series of lines of force, a silhouette artist, and a cultivator of force fields. The architect is one who thinks with his hands and gives himself freely to dexterous imagination. He pulls lines out of space not to give them determinate or even material shape but to push the very limit of matter to the extremities of their tensile—or what might become, during construction, volatile—potentiality. The architect embraces the void, the nothing. He touches emptiness at its extreme limit. Nothing the architect thinks does not run through this limit, line or border. This border is not only of land, however; it extends to the sea. Above all, it belongs to air, where nothing yet exists and where a vertical creation by sheer imagination awaits. A part of earth torn apart from itself will soon rise there, always a part apart, to make place for a more just space.

Secondly, the architect is not a foundationalist. Instead, he is resolutely anti-foundational, a craftsman who begins without prior ground. He neither inaugurates structures nor celebrates—or memorialises—the foundation. Instead, he looks for breaches and possibilities of potential fissures and cracks. He understands that sometimes in greatest impotentiality, behind the most stubborn walls of invisibility and disinterested withdrawal from the world, lie the highest, most intense or, as Ambedkar puts it, most ‘obdurate, merciless logic [and laws] of force’ (Ambedkar 1917, 21). The architect shares something of a relationship with the science and law of time, then, in a manner a prophet might: they both stand at the edge of groundlessness; at the limit of what is

given (or possible); the cusp of giving what has never been received (or imagined). ‘The great defect in the policy of least resistance and silent infiltration of rational ideas,’ Ambedkar posits in *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables?* (1945), ‘lies in this: that they do not compel thought, for they do not produce crisis’ (1978–2003, 9: 136).

The task of the architect is to live not only with the perennial imminence of crisis but also in intimacy with its disappointment, insofar as so much of crisis might simply be a repetition of unrepaired, festering wounds rather an opening for newness. The architect might even have to invent (something out of) crisis, or sometimes, imagine crisis into existence—even if as a groundless premonition of it—to make the law more morally durable against social assault. In the figure of the architect, an *anarchy of the new*, a vision of that which comes *before the law*, a judgement of that which exceeds the law—justice—intersects with the archaeologist’s obsession with longevity and fascination with endurance.

Thirdly, the architect—a fabricator of the unprecedented, his artifice of hope mounted on the groundless and the nothing (*sunnya*)—sees absolute freedom in his own judgement and cultivates the ability to trust it (in a manner the foundationalist simply cannot). It is not that Nehru, possibly Ambedkar’s most powerful peer, for example, did not make judgements. But, in him, there was less freedom, less contingency, less risk, more planning, more certainty, and, not by chance, more civilisation. Rivers are to Nehru what electricity is to Lenin. For all his precision, the architect understands the limits of ‘mathematical exactitude,’ for he understands that not counting but morals—a *moral jurisprudence that rejects vengeance*—alone might sometimes save the teeming millions from being reduced to barely alive fractions. This faith in the law, even as he must transgress it, gives the architect both a radical amphibiousness, a felicity with the fluidity of materials and, conversely, a facility with the materiality of fluids. The architect is no less a philosopher of touch than he is a figure in its history.

Above all, the architect is a democrat, one who, when he draws, inhabits the lines of force in the very abyss—Ambedkar says ‘dungeon’—of his own nonforce, his own ‘unpower’ (*aasakti*), committed to his own faithful surrender to its principle. He is one who understands that force, in the final instance, must remain inappropriable and belong not to power but to those wronged by it. In the architect, there is this enigmatic movement between force and non-force, between logic and the *dispositif*, between absolute weakness and soaring majesty, mastery even. The architect, above all, works close to the earth in only his own company, in a solitude whose gravity we are still to comprehend. His sense of self is scarred less by fears of democratic crises, which he prophetically anticipates, than it is by the majoritarian lust for stability.

For Ambedkar, the earth holds a lesson for politics as such. What seems constitutionally stable to our limited vision is not always, in truth, the most morally durable. What seems fecund with mortal life might instead hold the immortal remains of an extinct species, a history of violence done to life and buried in amnesia. The architect is driven not by *disenchantment* from earthly rules and constraints of the building laws; he is simply driven by the will to *demythologisation*.

‘Nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things,’ Du Bois writes in his chapter on ‘The Propaganda of History’ in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), published just a year before *Annihilation of Caste*. He asks in a tone unhopeful if not entirely hopeless, ‘Shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable?’ (Du Bois 2017, 638). For Ambedkar, the trouble with majoritarian hideousness is not that it will, with any degree of certainty, come undone in the future but that it has already wrecked the beauty of the past and left its memory to fester, attended only by a curated indifference. The counter-revolution might be ancient, but its denials are eternal. Its afterlife might endure well into all the future pasts that are still to come, its pervasive history of lying bound inextricably even to the most innocuous structures of common words and ordinary language. What would otherwise cause the modern caste subject to so frequently affirm, for example, ‘I do not practise caste?’ Or as someone like Baldwin might say of the white citizen’s equally frequent protestations that are couched in another iteration of the same denial and amnesia, ‘I am not a racist!’

It is this insight about civilisational denialism—from which follow a litany of civilisational felonies—that compels the architect to take his own work of founding seriously. It is the same insight that also compels him to patiently dismantle, with indomitable scepticism, the hubristic myths of that very founding. These two acts—of a demythologising architecture and a defiant archaeology—are, on the surface, incommensurable. And yet, in Ambedkar’s theory of democratic judgement, the passage of one ineluctably runs through the other. Only the architect knows that he has not simply sketched his lines over the depravity of the foundation’s violent, forgotten scaffold; he has also touched its empty, vindictive centre, its sovereign void. It is a void to which he alone might bring back, even at the risk of disappointment, a moral gravity—truthfulness—worthy of democracy. The architect must pardon the vengeance of even the most unforgivable crime, but he must never forget the punitive logic of foundation that has haunted it since the point of its inception. In that sense, the law is always violent, its effects often disappointing. And the lawgiver is but a ‘ghost,’ a real

test of our democratic will and of our ‘force,’ a young Ambedkar writes of Manu in ‘Castes in India’ (1978–2003, 1: 16).

This, then, is Ambedkar’s aporia, lodged, as Derrida (2023) might say, between the perjury of his countrymen and the pardon that he must grant them, which Ambedkar does, if only through his sovereign, undefeated exit we call ‘conversion.’ This majesty is also what lights his fraught passage through self-knowledge. It is a knowledge of the self and its emptiness, a reckoning with the violent foundations of one’s own craft and work with force that are not easy to bear, and they yield a very difficult freedom. What is justice if not this very yielding of freedom from the throes of inconsolable disappointment? What is force if not this solitary adventure into gravity and grace, one that the indefatigable architect alone can ever undertake?

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### Notes

- 1 On the moral and constitutional effects of this declaration of independence, which compresses Ambedkar's distinctive affirmation of political faith beyond the limits of civil religion, see Kumar (2018).
- 2 Gandhi, "Dr. Ambedkar's Indictment-I", *Harijan*, 11 July 1936 in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. See Gandhi (1999). On the politics of Gandhi's first reading of *Annihilation of Caste*, which I call an 'event' in the genealogy of Southern theory of political freedom, see Kumar (2015, Chapter 1). Meticulous or not, Gandhi's reading of Ambedkar's political faith is certainly grey. This greyness of nationalist response to *Annihilation of Caste* is also what decisively and unforgettably institutes it as an event. At the very least, given that, as a masterful critique of the anti-colonial *evasion* of political philosophy—which is to say, of its disinterest in human freedom—as such, *Annihilation of Caste* stands without precedent, prior example, or moral ground, it reveals itself as an event only through the

silence—the liberal vacation of responsibility—that surrounds it. It is an event because in both its logical structure and its moral architecture, the purity of force at work in *Annihilation of Caste*—its constitutive groundlessness—opens an abyss in that most elementary of relations between time and narrative (which is to say, in the relation between *amnesia* and *identity*) that is forged in Ambedkar’s own time by such works as Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar’s *Hindutva*. *Annihilation of Caste* is a text on political responsibility precisely because, while it arrives out of joint with time, it is also an untimely meditation on time. It is a moral claim to memory composed against civilisational (or majoritarian) amnesia, one to which orthodox nationalism could neither respond with an exculpatory story (or nostalgic counter-memory) of its own—nationalist response to it was marked by theological fear—nor consign its indictment to yet another tradition of critique that they might have claimed as their own. To read *Annihilation of Caste* as an event is to respond to this radical untimeliness that seeks human freedom in the reclamation of mortal, finite time: the time that was stolen from the unequal; the time as it was before the counter-revolution set in, which is tragically also the time that never sought to free itself from that reactionary catastrophe; and which, therefore, is now a time that has been emptied of all memory. An immovable scaffold of denialism has been erected, reproduced by institutional *doxa*, under whose shadow the politics of finitude—justice for those mortals who always find themselves waging a losing battle for a little more time on earth—has been simply replaced by the brutal desire for civilisational stability. It is this illusion of stability that Ambedkar calls ‘armed neutrality’ (1978–2003, 1: 64). On the uses of this expression in Ambedkar’s critique of violence, see Kumar (2020).

- 3 Here, as elsewhere, I use ‘yielding’ in the sense developed by Paul North (2015) in his work on Kafka’s atheology.
- 4 Ambedkar’s enduring critique of capital punishment, which he begins to weave publicly in *Annihilation of Caste*, must be seen in light of this rejection of political vengeance as a foundation of his constitutional theory and jurisprudence. It is a rejection that marks the still unfolding finale of his prophetic vision and gathers renewed salience with every passing day. For any society that continues to punish its citizens with death, sometimes leaving them on death row for years as they wait for the abyss to open, at other times summarily hanging them off trees just miles away from the national capital, in no palpable way makes itself safer. It simply institutionalises routine, social vendetta among citizens as a way of life, executed by sanction of the law. Caste would simply be the most modern name for this archaic rule by vengeance—or vindictive civility.
- 5 See Rajagopalachari, ‘A Restless Spirit Has Found Peace’ (1956).
- 6 I modulate here, following Ambedkar, the vastly unstudied expression from John Stuart Mill, whose exact words are ‘the wellbeing of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested’ (Mill 2003, 110). Ambedkar’s

reading of Mill—amplified around their shared affinity for the Tocquevillian expression ‘tyranny of the majority’ (Tocqueville 2000, 239; Mill 2003, 76)—must be taken up elsewhere. Suffice it to say here that Ambedkar is not always convinced by British jurisprudence, even though he would deliver an entire course in Bombay that eventually became his *Lectures on the English Constitution*. The real trouble with Mill’s idea of ‘uncontested truths’ is that it attaches, very explicitly, to the idea of number, measure and the majority. A majority bound by the murderous consent of the caste contract is no less susceptible to perjury than the clique of demagogues who speak in its name. The place of truth in politics gets more and not less tenuous when it turns towards the uncontested. For Ambedkar, the challenge is not to bring coercive supports and normative banisters to guardrail the common truth; it is to lend truth a *gravity, a force minimal but indefatigable*.

- 7 ‘Within the Veil was he born, said I; and there within shall he live,—a Negro and a Negro’s son,’ Du Bois writes in that searing passage in his chapter ‘Of the Passing of the First-Born.’ ‘Holding in that little head—ah, bitterly!—the unbowed pride of a hunted race, clinging with that tiny dimpled hand—ah, wearily!—to a hope not hopeless but unhelpful, and seeing with those bright wondering eyes that peer into my soul a land whose freedom is to us a mockery and whose liberty a lie.’ See Du Bois (2015, 157). I discuss elsewhere the place of this melancholic pessimism—one that is acutely aware both of the debilitating seizure and of the revolutionary power of disappointment, and whose searing rhetoric almost always borders on the style of the classical funeral oration—in the democratic thought of Du Bois, Ambedkar, Baldwin and more recently, Barack Obama.
- 8 It is not simply democracy as a political form that might collapse without this faculty of judgement—this capacity to separate the truth from untruth, as the cover inscription of *Annihilation of Caste* declares—but the citizen’s relationship to words themselves. Thus, Obama’s warning that the weakening of the truth-telling tradition marks democracy’s ‘epistemological crisis’ (Obama 2020).
- 9 ‘Architecture as a state of becoming already defies its traditional idea of stability and stasis. But what,’ Eisenman asks, ‘is an architecture of becoming?’ (2007, 57)
- 10 ‘Genealogy is gray, meticulous and patiently documentary,’ goes that definitive opening sentence of his essay on truth and method, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.’ See Foucault (1984, 76).
- 11 The classic statement of this condescension towards species without hands appears in Heidegger. ‘Apes too have organs that can grasp, but they do not have hands,’ Heidegger points out. ‘The hand is infinitely different from all the grasping organs—paws, claws, or fangs—different by an abyss of essence,’ Heidegger (1968, 16). At work here is not simply the denigration of those who are marked by a lack of hands among their organs, say apes or dogs. At stake here—even if Heidegger quickly says, ‘Only a being who can speak, that is, think, can have hands and can be handy in achieving works of handicraft’—is the thread of

contempt that runs through national humanism and destroys it from within. Caste insinuates itself into humanism—thereby itself becoming profoundly modern—through an archaic inversion of this ontology, for it limits itself not only to those who have no hands. It pulls into its vortex of condescension next those who also work *with* their hands, who are considered, within the schema of this punishing humanism, just barely more gifted than the animal, their being barely of and on time. Ambedkar engages this distinguished ontology of being and time (a profoundly moralistic, civilisational ontology) in his archaeology of the word *antjya*. The word literally means a figure born at the end of time, barely surviving in it, its humanity adjacent to the animal alone. The figure is consigned by caste law to perpetual inequality precisely because it works (only) with the hand (but also only ever) on (animal) skin. Ambedkar's *antjya* is infra-human, as I suggest elsewhere. See Kumar (2020). Any ultramodern and techno-biological rhetoric of nationalist 'spirit,' about which Ambedkar openly warns in the 1940s, is inextricable from this violent, possessive humanism of, and around, the hand and from the constantly lurking possibility of its degeneration into a regime of manual cruelty. It would be a regime in which extreme violence would be executed by brute force of the hand—by simple, blunt tools and elementary knots and nooses, their movements and shapes improvised reflexively in a moment of murderous delirium, without planning, but always within an apparatus of habit that is cured and encased in the logic of caste life—right in the middle of the city, directed often against those who labour with their hands. It is because of this violent humanism of the hand that Ambedkar remains profoundly ambivalent towards national-spiritual and ascetic celebrations of manual work: not because he would rather have the machine take over manual work altogether but because, on the contrary, ritual asceticism has already insinuated itself into the most archaic logic—*techne*—of the machine. So that nationalism's apotheosis of the working, laborious, crafty hand barely conceals its sacrificial impulse to mechanically, almost thoughtlessly, take the life of precisely those who are disposable because they work by hand. Caste and class violence blur in this zone of manual delirium. This torsion and distortion are on Derrida's mind when he calls attention, in the context of national socialism, to the monstrosity lodged within the figure of the handyman. See especially Derrida (2003, 'Heidegger's Hand: Geschlecht II', 32).

- 12 Although quite distinct from the Arendtian conception, Soumyabrata Choudhury's galvanising use of the term in *Ambedkar and Other Immortals* (2018) points to the same awareness of limit that constitutes the *figure* of Ambedkar as an architect: transcendent and earthly.
- 13 Ruins come paradoxically alive in a world ruled by majoritarian resentment. For not only does resentment leave in its wake the shared vision and promise of an equal society (and equal earth) in ruins, it also turns ruins themselves into sites for the most visceral, most tactile expressions of rage against the mythic injustices of history (and its monuments). This

relationship between the resplendence of architecture and barbarism of civic strife, between the dignity of persons (and epochs) and their very defacement as things, fuelled by a tactical politicisation of majoritarian grievance, is fundamental to the logic of political cruelty. Not any violence but only violence that by sheer force turns life into a thing, as Simone Weil might put it, can be called cruelty (Weil 2003, 45). The archaeologist is the miner of this 'living thing', a figure at once of the living and its decomposed Other—Derrida might say the figure of 'life death' (2020)—buried now by amnesia and now lying.

14 Benjamin writes:

Philosophical history, the science of the origin is the form which, in the remotest extremes and the apparent excesses of the process of development, reveals the configuration of the idea—the sum total of all possible meaningful juxtapositions of such opposites. The representation of an idea can under no circumstances be considered successful unless the whole range of possible extremes it contains has been virtually explored. (1998, 47)

No thinker in the anti-colonial tradition traverses these extremes of thought—and certainly none probes the entire spectrum of their possibilities and impossibilities—more powerfully than Ambedkar.

15 I think here of the powerful strand of radical liberalism that sees the greatest threat of majoritarian and caste cruelty to reside in political fear as opposed to social anger. See especially Judith Shklar (1984). Anger is the moral counterpart to democratic disappointment, perhaps the most irrefutable truth and fact of democratic life, rather than the ferocious belief that one deserves no disappointment ever, and that every unearned disappointment is, therefore, a reason for retribution against those who cause it through an imagined, punishable crime. This ironic vengeance of punishing others for the sake of a world without disappointment is the root of resentful monstrosity. A world without disappointment would yield a terrifying architecture (or destroy all of it).

16 In probing the relationship between posture, sovereignty and dignity, I follow Jacques Derrida (2009).

17 Despite appearances, this toxic heteronomy plays not an insignificant part in Charles Taylor's magisterial account in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1992).

18 This archaeology of 'police power' appears, among other equally powerful—and searingly titled—meditations in the essay 'Their Wishes Are Laws unto Us,' (Ambedkar 1978–2003, 5: 272–286).

19 In a passage that most powerfully captures Ambedkar's enigmatic reluctance to be called an architect (and his disappointment that he was caught being one, perhaps even the *sovereign* one, among them), Arendt writes:

The crucial point is that the law—although it defines the space in which men live with one another without using force—has

something violent about it in terms of both its origins and its nature. It comes into being by means of production, not action; the lawgiver resembles the architect of the city and its builder, not the *politikos* and citizen. The law produces the arena where politics occurs, and contains in itself the violent force inherent in all production. (2005, 181–182)

Could one be the lawgiver, the architect, on the one hand, and on the other, a critic of violence and its archaeologist, at one and the same time?

- 20 For a genealogy of the appearance of this term in Ambedkar's November 1949 Constituent Assembly speech, see Mehta (2010) and Kumar (2015).
- 21 *Outside the Fold* (1998) by Gauri Viswanathan still remains an unsurpassed genealogy of this event, which in itself says something more significant.
- 22 Marx, among all the 19th-century thinkers, gives most prolifically to Ambedkar's revolutionary vocabulary. At the heart of this affinity is the status of philosophy as a revolutionary *form* or, better still, philosophy as the architecture of emancipation. 'Just as philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy,' Marx writes in his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. 'The head of this emancipation is philosophy; its heart is the proletariat' (Marx 1844). One could with justice posit that Ambedkar takes this right to philosophy and converts Marx's call for proletarian 'transcendence' into a revolutionary *supplement*, deepening the Marxian formula further in *Philosophy of Hinduism* when he writes, 'Revolution is the mother of philosophy, and if it is not the mother of philosophy it is a lamp which illuminates philosophy' (1978–2003, 3: 8).
- 23 I develop this critique towards a Southern theory of political freedom in Kumar (2024).
- 24 I am indebted to Huzaifa Omair Siddiqi for this insight into the unavoidable *jointure* between any political philosophy worthy of the name and the desire for annihilation of caste, which must be inscribed at its heart. It is in this sense that Ambedkar's political thought is always of the future, always a meditation on—and out of joint with—time.
- 25 I draw the motif of philosophical evasion here from Cornel West's unsparing 'genealogy of pragmatism' in America (1989).