

# The writer's malady

André Gorz, 1923–2007

**W**hen André Gorz committed suicide with his wife last September, even President Sarkozy felt obliged to pay tribute to 'a major intellectual figure of the French and European Left'. Gorz never courted fame or celebrity, but the dramatic manner of his death created a storm of publicity and turned his last work, a beautiful paean to his wife, into a financial godsend for the small publishing house Galilée. In fact, *Lettre à D. Histoire d'un amour* (2006) had already been an unexpected success, with the first print run selling 20,000 copies in a matter of weeks, and a regular stream of French and German journalists and camera crews arriving at the couple's house in l'Aube for interviews. Old friends, whom they had all but lost touch with, suddenly made affectionate contact again. Strangers, including young lovers inspired by what they had read, wrote to the couple asking for the secret ingredients of a sixty-year romance. Gorz himself was so amused by the attention that he repeatedly announced, with playful irony, 'We're becoming famous!' Yet the personal story behind *Lettre à D*, and the publicizing of the couple's life that it entailed, was more complex than a sentimental reading of the book would suggest.

It was at a game of poker in September 1947 that Gorz, then known by his real name Gérard Horst, first met 23-year-old Dorine Kier, who had recently arrived in Lausanne from England and was working as an au pair. They married three months after moving to Paris in June 1949, with Gorz gaining a work permit through the promise of a secretarial job in the World Citizens' Movement, a pacifist organization whose newsletter the couple had sold on the streets of Lausanne. In 1951 Gorz was appointed to the staff of the right-wing tabloid *Paris-Presse*, writing, invariably with the help of his wife, a daily review of foreign newspapers. Told that German names were unpalatable to the French public so soon after the end of the war, and that there were already two 'Gérards' on the paper, he chose to write under the pseudonym 'Michel Bosquet'. After his fellow columnist Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber left in 1955 to start a new weekly, *L'Express*, Gorz found himself recruited by his former colleague, gaining French nationality for himself and his wife in the process. When *L'Express* reversed its centre-left stance in 1964, Gorz, who by this time was part of Sartre's inner circle on the editorial board of *Les Temps Modernes*, founded *Le Nouvel Observateur* with Jean Daniel, Serge Lafaurie, Jacques-Laurent Bost and K.S. Karol. A collection of articles for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, from which he retired in 1983, was translated into English and published, under the pseudonym Bosquet, as *Capitalism in Crisis and Everyday Life* (1977).

It is possible to divide Gorz's intellectual output into three phases, and instructive to follow these phases in reverse. My own generation of students, scholars and activists encountered Gorz in the 1980s, our attention seized by the sparkling utopianism and moral libertarianism of *Farewell to the Working Class* (1982) and *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation of Work* (1985). These books opened up, with unusual clarity and eloquence, a world of politics and theory that was the complete antithesis to the intellectual posturing and verbiage that post-structuralism had brought into vogue in British universities. In a strange way, with his critique of dogmatic Marxism and his attack on the glorification of work by a de-radicalized labour movement, Gorz actually made Marx interesting again; or, rather, he laid a path which, if you were willing to follow led through Marx and out again.

On the other side of Marx was an understanding of capitalism as a system of hetero-regulation which aggressively de-civilized human beings, undermining their ability to look after themselves and meaningfully navigate through the social, economic and technological environments in a life-enhancing, self-determining way. Gorz's critique of the employment society, which he developed further in the brilliant *Critique of Economic Reason* (1989) and then in *Reclaiming Work* (1999), reached out to trade unionists and party activists by translating theoretical insights into policies for alternative income distribution systems and a programme for the managed reduction in working time designed to energize debate and practical thinking. This was accompanied by Gorz's distinctive moral voice, which quietly insisted that there could be no meaningful political agency unless the actor – and most certainly the reader – strived to constitute him or herself as a subject. This meant refusing the escape routes of dogmatism, conformism, and submission to the coercive domination of logic over meaning. It meant, in Hannah Arendt's Heideggerian terms, a resistance to 'the social' – that anonymous, anodyne, taken-for-granted world of natural self-evidences that every individual must wrestle with and defy in order to be themselves.

Technocratic science was one major adversary in this regard. His writings on ecology, including the seminal *Ecology as Politics* (1980) and later *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology* (1994), challenged the ideology of productivism. But Gorz also argued for an anthropocentric humanism that made our unique capacity for self-restraint not simply a means of environmental sustainability, but a source of ethical autonomy and 'time for living' – what Kate Soper felicitously calls an 'alternative hedonism'. In this respect technology had contradictory potential. It could, by its ubiquity and complexity, and by its spellbinding efficiency, become the irresistible template for mechanically judging, measuring and ultimately modelling human beings themselves. Yet through his engagements with the theories of the knowledge economy and the Negrian Marxists, Gorz also argued, most recently in *L'immatériel* (2003), that the digital revolution had made freedom from wage-labour and the obsolescence of exchange-value a reality already inherent in the logic of capitalism.

Gorz's challenge to productivism owed something to his friendship with Herbert Marcuse, which began with their chance meeting at the Mexican National School of Political and Social Sciences in 1966. It was also inspired by the charismatic influence of Ivan Illich, whose writings Gorz had translated and published in *Les Temps Modernes* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Concepts such as heteronomous and convivial technology, industrial nemesis, the modernization of poverty, and radical monopoly, were all adopted by Gorz in his attempt to develop a humanist critique of capitalism that retained some of the analytical rigour of Marx's political economy.

If the third chronological phase in Gorz's thinking was marked by his interest in ecology, it is a tribute to his forward-looking outlook that this interest overlaps with the second phase of his work, rooted in the 1960s, which is what first brought Gorz to the attention of socialist thinkers and labour process theorists in Britain and the USA. As a political journalist in the 1960s, Gorz was a regular visitor to the offices of the various French trade-union federations, knew many of the central figures in the Unified Socialist Party (PSU), and had links with Italian intellectuals and trade-union leaders associated with the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL). *Strategy for Labour* (1967), which appeared in French in 1964, was targeted directly at radicalized trade unionists and those attempting to build a European labour movement strong enough to tackle the internationalization of capital that had followed from the formation of the Common Market in 1958.

*Strategy for Labour* had a companion volume, *Le Socialisme Difficile* (1967), published in English as *Socialism and Revolution* (1975). Both texts explored how different groups of workers could be politically mobilized and a process of 'non-reformist reform' initiated in the most economically advanced societies. Later on, Gorz was

surprised to learn of the impression *Strategy for Labour* had made on the 'Juso', the Young Socialists in West Germany. In 1983 he welcomed to his home a busload of forty militants and former Juso activists who wanted to talk to him about the strategic implications of the seemingly heretical *Farewell to the Working Class*. In these three days of discussions, Gorz not only discovered a new generation of German intellectuals but also rediscovered a language he had not spoken for over forty years.

A constant theme in Gorz's writings is the delicate interface between freedom and necessity. In *The Holy Family* Marx and Engels had argued that once the proletariat had been fully denied their humanity, the revolt against that inhumanity would take the form of an 'absolutely imperative need'. The simple demand for survival, in other words, was already a fundamental challenge to the structure of capitalism, for the need for food could not be satisfied without contesting the suppression of freedom. Gorz himself resisted the temptation to reduce freedom to necessity, but he agreed that the choice of freedom was more probably for those whose world was unliveable, whose lives, riven by contradictions, could not be seamlessly perpetuated by recourse to an infallible law of human nature, a social identity, or a sense of absolute moral legitimacy.

What was critical was to ascertain the kind of theoretical and political mediations that could turn the 'probable' into something meaningful and desirable. This task was made more urgent by the rise of the 'affluent society', which seemed to have disproved Marx's theory of the immiseration of the proletariat. Now the challenge was to expose those needs which 'affluent' capitalism could not meet, as well as those needs which commerce deliberately created – by privatizing natural resources, for example, or combining the useful with the wasteful and the superfluous – in order to profit from satisfying them. This critique, which Gorz developed by drawing on American thinkers such as C. Wright Mills, J.K. Galbraith, David Riesman and Vance Packard, contained most of the ingredients of his later political ecology.

An exploration of the link between freedom and necessity was partly the aim of *La morale de l'histoire* (1959), which, in its fusion of historical materialism with existentialism, forms the bridge between the second phase of Gorz's work and the first phase of pure Sartreanism. In 1946, spurred on by having met Sartre, Gorz had begun writing a philosophical treatise aimed at addressing the unresolved tensions in *Being and Nothingness*. This book had been his intellectual compass since its publication in 1943, conferring a near-redemptive philosophical credence on his own sense of meaninglessness and illegitimacy. Yet what Gorz saw in Sartre the person – his striking concreteness, his absolute presence in the here and now – he could not find in Sartre's philosophical manifesto, which ultimately concluded that all choices were equally absurd, that 'it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations'.

*Fondements pour une morale*, which took ten years (and 1,500 pages) to write, was Gorz's answer to this conundrum. Rejected by publishers at the time, an edited version was finally brought out by Galilée in 1977, read mainly by Sartrean scholars and sadly never fully translated into English. The book used Sartre's discussion of temporality in *Being and Nothingness* to outline a hierarchy of values the ascendance of which required a progressively more intense, and therefore more difficult, degree of 'nihilation'. Valorization of the past, where consciousness chooses to be permeated by the facticity of its natural and cultural world, thus gives rise to 'vital values'; valorization of the present, in which consciousness refuses the facticity of being in order to make itself, nothingness, the origin of all experience, gives rise to aesthetic values; and valorization of the future, where consciousness chooses to assume its facticity in order to change it, gives rise to moral values. Gorz proposed that the contradictions of each 'ethical plane' could only be surmounted by access to a higher level of consciousness capable of mediating and relativizing the pursuit of a specific region of value. Failure

to do so resulted in inauthenticity or bad faith, and a considerable part of *Fondements* is devoted to describing the range of fixated personality types or ‘attitudes’ which are characteristic of the lower levels of consciousness. Only by choosing oneself as the doer of an open future could the individual begin to accomplish what Sartre, Beauvoir and Francis Jeanson had called a ‘moral conversion’.

When Gorz delivered the finished manuscript to Sartre in 1956 he was left wondering what exactly he had achieved. Ten years of philosophical introspection had not brought him any closer to his own moral conversion, for his reconstruction of Sartre’s existentialism, he realized, was itself a form of evasion, of losing himself in the abstract anonymity of thought. Suspecting, in any case, that Sartre would not read his magnum opus, he immediately embarked on a new writing project, the purpose of which was to apply the method of self-analysis outlined in *Fondements* to himself. The result was *Le Traître*, published, with a lengthy preface by Sartre, in 1958. Mindful of the hurt it



might cause his mother were she to read it, and wary of endangering, due to its political content, his status as a French citizen, he chose ‘Gorz’ as his new pseudonym, finding the word imprinted by the manufacturer on a pair of Austrian army binoculars he had inherited from his father. On the border of Italy and Slovenia, *Görz* was a town with an identity whose history was as ambiguous as his own.

*The Traitor* (English translation 1960) is a remarkable text. It begins with a cataloguing of the author’s most definitive personality traits – his emotional and material asceticism, his intellectualism, his addiction to systematization, habit and routine – then traces this ‘constant total means of existing as little as possible’ to the childhood formation of his ‘original project’. This was, he realizes, a ‘choice of nullity’ fashioned initially as a defensive reaction against the unattainable demands of his overambitious mother, then elaborated and enriched by his discovery of his

(incomplete) Jewishness, his experience of anti-Semitism, and then his ‘second exile’ as a half-Jewish Austrian teenager in Switzerland. Gorz made clear in *The Traitor* that he understood how his compulsion to write was also an articulation of this original choice, a way of rendering the factual world inessential by re-creating it in thought and language. In the course of writing the text, he also appeared to transcend this fixation, recognizing that his choice of not-being and not-belonging made possible a positive alliance with the politically oppressed, the excluded and the silenced.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Gorz at eighty was still essentially the same person depicted in *The Traitor*. He retained his bird-like gestures, his barely audible voice, his aversion to people, and his liking for precision, predictability and routine. On one occasion he veered off the forest path we were following, ducking under branches to find a damp refuge in which we could crouch undetected, continuing our hushed conversation until

the boisterous voices ahead of us had passed and faded. He was also permanently distracted by his wife, whose company he was increasingly reluctant to leave, and on whom he lavished unwavering attention and tenderness. It was as if loving Dorine to the exclusion of everything else was the one task at which he simply would not fail.

Gorz's writing career would not have been possible without the moral and intellectual support of his wife. The decision not to have children was undoubtedly a sacrifice for Dorine, who could not immortalize herself in words as her husband had done but who might have gained comfort from the thought that her offspring would outlive her. And comfort was a luxury for Dorine. For although she had survived cancer of the endometrium in 1975, she continued to be plagued by an incurable, and desperately painful, neurological disorder known as adhesive arachnoiditis, caused by the oil-based and toxic myelographic agent lipiodol being injected into her spine to sharpen the contrast levels in an X-ray (a tragic example of Illich's theory of iatrogenesis). *Lettre à D. Histoire d'un amour*, a homage to Gorz's ailing wife, was also an attempt to immortalize her life, to show that none of his accomplishments would have been possible without her, that he was her creation and that his creations were also hers. Yet the conception and birth of this book was not a painless affair. As the couple aged and Dorine's health deteriorated, a number of passages in Gorz's most famous work, *The Traitor*, had begun to bother her. Why, she demanded, did he portray her as a lost and lonely figure whose life he had 'made liveable' with his self-redeeming love, when in truth she was a happy and mature woman with plenty of friends, a variety of commitments, and even a fiancé waiting for her back in England? For how long would this feeble image of her endure in the minds of his readers?

In *Lettre à D.*, Gorz tried to set the record straight. He renounced the claim, which he had previously made in *The Traitor*, that he had 'converted' himself through the very writing of the book. In truth, his transformation only occurred after the book had been published, when his writing achieved a worldly existence in the public sphere, and when he was forced to be accountable to what he had thought and said. His inaccurate depiction of Dorine, though hardly shameful, was a symptom of his unresolved 'nullity complex', his attraction to the aesthetic idea of 'shipwrecked love' (in a bourgeois society, he pretentiously wrote, no complete union between equals was possible), and his search not for life but for an 'excuse' to carry on living. 'To be passionately in love for the first time, to be loved in return, was apparently too banal, too private, too common' for the person Gorz was in 1957. It was incompatible, he explained, with his infantile project to escape the concrete and 'accede to the universal'.

The critical acclaim for *Lettre à D* brought happiness to the couple in the months before their death, but Dorine remained uncomfortable with its publication. Suicides are not unheard of among arachnoiditis sufferers, and the couple had long-established plans for their 'final exit', using Derek Humphry's book of the same title as their medical guide. In the aftermath of their death, which was prompted by another vicious episode of Dorine's illness, but which the publication of their love story, for Gorz at least, must certainly have made easier, I understood her reservations more clearly. The temptations of publicity, the opportunity for fame-by-association, the invasion of the public sphere by the fleeting display of private feelings and experiences, endangers the things we cherish most. Just as Gorz did not want children because he wanted his wife to himself, Dorine did not want her husband's love for her, and hers for him, to be shared with the world. Writing, for Gorz, was always an aesthetic escape from the facticity of the world, and even the humble and moving letter of devotion he penned to his wife, when crafted and displayed as a work of beauty, had the aesthetic effect of rendering the relationship it depicted inessential. In their joint death, I think, this incurable malady of the writer was finally put to rest, and Gorz – for me, a peerless intellectual and irreplaceable friend – committed his life, not his words or ideas, to the woman he loved.

**Finn Bowring**