

# Reading Ivan Illich on the Elemental Body

by Babette Babich

*“Philosophy was deprived of the body  
and the body was deprived of its cosmic belonging.”*

— Ivan Illich<sup>1</sup>

The body is flesh: incarnate, corporeal. To speak of the body and of incarnation, Ivan Illich (1926-2002), invokes different manifestations, elemental phenomenological presences speaking of the body in terms of earth, water, air, and, when invoking angels, speaking of fire.

This bodily reference is evident in his *Tools for Conviviality*, eschewing accelerating technology for the sake of bodily life, lived in community with others. The theme has been elusive for scholars and Illich reflects that reading the title of his book requires the French and Latin: “con-viviality.” To explain, Illich refers to Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiology of Taste*, citing the subtitle: *Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*.<sup>2</sup> One will need both David Hume and Epicurus to grasp the reference to the convivial as this

1 Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as Told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), 129.

2 Illich refers to Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiology of Taste: Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*. See Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Handbook of Dining; or Corpulency and Leanness Scientifically Considered*, trans. L. F. Simpson (New York: Appleton, 1865); originally published as *Physiologie du goût ou Méditations de gastronomie transcendante. Ouvrage théorique, historique, et à l’ordre du jour, dédié aux gastronomes parisiens* [Physiology of Taste, or Meditations on Transcendent Gastronomy: A Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Treatment, Dedicated to the Gastronomes of Paris] (Paris: Charpentier, 1825). For a discussion of the reference both to critical theoretical thinking and the body, see the author’s chapter on David Hume and on Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘aesthetic science’ in Babich, ed., *Reading David Hume’s Standard of Taste* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 213-239.

presupposes as Illich later underlines, a theological austerity linked to Aquinas and Hugo Rahner's definition of "*eutrapelia*" as "playful grace."<sup>3</sup> Rahner himself saves the point for his final chapter (rather than beginning with it as Illich does), as a "forgotten virtue."<sup>4</sup>

Illich begins by emphasizing that his earlier analysis in *Deschooling Society* had uncovered a fundamental "paradigm" that could be extended (Michel de Certeau will repeat Illich's parallel almost verbatim) to "other industrial enterprises, each producing a service commodity, each organized as a public utility, and each defining its output as a basic necessity."<sup>5</sup>

Qua schooled, we are programmed to expect certain kinds of intervention:

People who are hooked on teaching are conditioned to be customers for everything else. They see their own personal growth as an accumulation of institutional outputs, and prefer what institutions *make* over what they themselves can do. They repress the ability to discover reality by their own lights.<sup>6</sup>

Thereby it is the doctors themselves — and only the doctors, or as in the case of a 'standard of care,' the purveyors of pharmaceuticals, who define the scales assessing the success of medicine which permits the "pretence of doctors that they provided people with superior health."<sup>7</sup> At issue is the trade-off between supposed health, the ideal (always falsifiable but

3 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Marion Boyars, 2009), 6.

4 Hugo v. Rahner, *Man at Play*, Brian Battershaw and Edward Quinn, trans. (Providence: Cluny Media, 1972), 117. [Original: *Der spielende Mensch* (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1957)].

5 Illich, *Conviviality*, 4.

6 Illich, *Conviviality*, 80.

7 Illich, *Conviviality*, 9.

only ‘too late’) of living longer, and the often extreme bodily insult exacted in terms of vitality and conviviality in exchange:

The cost of healing was dwarfed by the cost of extending sick life; more people survived longer months with their lives hanging on a plastic tube, imprisoned in iron lungs, or hooked onto kidney machines.<sup>8</sup>

As Illich goes on to point out,

Ninety percent of all medical care for patients with terminal diseases is unrelated to their health; such treatment tends to increase suffering and disability without demonstrably lengthening life.<sup>9</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that no part of what Illich details here has changed in the interim: not the percentage (if anything, as other studies have confirmed Illich’s assessments, it is worse) and certainly not patient demands for more and more of such ‘futile’ treatments.<sup>10</sup> But Illich argues that attention to the one’s own felt bodily reality with respect to medical intervention remains necessary as “society”

can have no quantitative standards by which to add up the negative value of illusion, social control, prolonged suffering, loneliness, genetic deterioration, and frustration produced by medical treatment.<sup>11</sup>

It may be argued that the body, for Illich, offers the key to unlocking the spiritual.

Thus Illich repeatedly visits the parable of the Good

8 Illich, *Conviviality*, 9.

9 Illich, *Conviviality*, 96.

10 Babich, “Ivan Illich’s Medical Nemesis and the ‘Age of the Show’: On the Expropriation of Death,” *Nursing Philosophy*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2018): 1-14.

11 Illich, *Conviviality*, 14.

Samaritan: unpacking the Greek ἐσπλαγγνίσθη in Luke 10:33, usually translated as ‘compassion,’ taking care to remind the reader of a gut compulsion (the reference in ancient Greek is to the bowel and a painful torsion). Highlighting the radicality of the Samaritan’s assistance — not utterly unlike Samuel Beckett’s indictment of the zero-sum violence of charity, “Against the charitable gesture there is no defence”<sup>12</sup> — has left some wondering, as Illich recalls, how to unpack “the new freedom which allows the Samaritan to step outside his own milieu and pick up that half-dead Jew in the ditch.”<sup>13</sup> How is that “freedom”? Intensifying the point — Beckett’s “kind lady” of the Salvation Army pales by comparison —

Perhaps today we would call that Samaritan an intolerable and violent Palestinian since the point of Jesus’ story was that the one who helped was a foreigner, and even an enemy to the man in the ditch.<sup>14</sup>

Illich underlines that the beaten Jew will have to choose to accept this help as every offer of assistance must be chosen in return, as freely as the assistance is freely offered. At the same time, the same choice, volition, freedom, enables “the possibility of its breakage ... denial, infidelity, turning away, coldness.”<sup>15</sup>

Here I reflect on the elements of earth, water, air, and fire in Illich’s thinking. But today, an era Illich described as ‘the age of the show,’ that is, the era of social media and omnipresent/invisible surveillance, “the” elements would seem to have vanished along with their reference to the body:

12 I know Beckett’s phrase as repeated for decades by my (very) Protestant husband who knew organized religion as the son of a congregationalist minister who worked for World YMCA, Tracy Burr Strong (1943-2022).

13 Illich, *Rivers*, 95.

14 Illich, *Rivers*, 95.

15 Illich, *Rivers*, 52.

New optical techniques were used to remove the picture of reality from the space within which the fingers can handle, the nose can smell, and the tongue can taste it, and show it in a new “objective” isometric space into which no sentient being can enter. We are threatened by the emergence of an epoch that takes the show for image.<sup>16</sup>

What is more, a focus on theology can tend to obscure Illich’s formation as a historian. Contrary to popular assertions (by none less than Gov. Jerry Brown) and by received scholarship including *Illich* scholarship, we will need Illich’s formation as a historian to understand his insights on the body, in particular. This is not surprising since, as Nietzsche points out in his *Twilight of the Idols*, the body has managed to frustrate philosophers for millennia:

‘...And away above all with the body, that pitiable *idée fixe* of the senses! Infected with every error of logic there is, refuted, impossible even, notwithstanding it is impudent enough to behave as if it actually existed’  
...<sup>17</sup>

Speaking here of philosophizing “with a *hammer*,” referring to the (medical or musical) hammer or diapason used to sound out bodies, Nietzsche, like Illich, refers to the way the bowels reply with a “famous hollow sound which speaks”.<sup>18</sup> At stake, for Illich, is the mystery of incarnation: *ensarcosis*. And to this same extent, Illich makes Nietzsche’s point more radically, in terms of *conspiratio*, “My inner sphere, atmosphere, and horizon is not one of

16 Illich: “Guarding the Eye in the Age of the Show,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 28 (Autumn, 1995): 47-61.

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, R.J. Hollingdale, trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), (‘Reason in Philosophy’ 1), 35.

18 Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 21.

dread but one of union with the Lord of the universe, who became a man to make me divine.”<sup>19</sup> Thus in his conversations with David Cayley, Illich, like a preacher, varies key points, noting with respect to the context of incarnation, the “coldness” mentioned above. The other side of the same mystery, deity becomes flesh, coldness is also a testament to the mystery of apotheosis, the human divinized.<sup>20</sup>

## I. Earth

### *Earth as Body*

From one point of view, the surface view, it can seem as if the majority of Illich’s bodily references are earthly. And to speak of peace, invoking the sacrament of the mass and thus the kiss of peace, Illich resorts to the earth. In his Bremen lecture of 1998,<sup>21</sup> Illich recalls at some length the ethnographic challenge of explaining ‘peace’ in a lecture he had earlier given in Japan, 35 years after the end of World War II and its bombs, to a people who could not but the somatic illustration of the Roman sense of *pax* he is compelled to give as historian and Latin philologist, disquieting in a bodily fashion, that is revulsion:

*conspiratio*, that is, a breathing into each other’s mouths. That’s what Christians did. They came together to eat and to kiss, to kiss on the mouth. In this way they shared the Holy Spirit and became members of a community in flesh, blood, and spirit.<sup>22</sup>

19 Illich, *Rivers*, 99.

20 Illich, *Rivers*, 99.

21 Illich, “The Cultivation of Conspiracy” in: Lee Hoinacki et Carl Mitcham, eds., *The Challenges of Ivan Illich: A Collective Reflection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 233-242.

22 Illich, *Rivers*, 85.

In an effort to allow his Japanese interlocutors to hear the meaning of peace/‘pax,’ Illich acknowledged the collision of visceral, bodily sensibilities and to bridge two cultures, Illich invokes *fûdo* — wind *and* earth, in the lecture he gave in German, emphasizing the German title of Watsuji’s Tetsurō’s (1889-1960) 1935 book *Wind und Erde*.<sup>23</sup> Tetsurō’s book title is badly rendered in English as ‘climate’ (one will need *milieu* with its differentiations along with Illich’s *atmosphere*) and to this extent we may read Illich as a caution against co-opting Tetsurō for the sake of today’s political thematization of ‘climate change.’ Neto Leão’s reflections on the idea of a *pax oecologica* sets the timeliness of Illich’s reflections on our own insistence on ‘climate’ not for the sake of business as usual, but for business accelerated by disaster and increasingly unchecked greed.<sup>24</sup>

To explain peace as *amicitia*, friendship, required indication by way of a term familiar to his listeners, telling his interlocutors in Bremen that the ‘iconogram’ in question was lacking:

My teacher, Professor Tamanoy, explained *fûdo* to me as “the inimitable freshness that arises from the commingling of a particular soil with the appropriate waters.” Trusting my learned pacifist guide, since deceased, I started from the notion of *fûdo*.

The words Illich recalls from his teacher’s definition invoke a bodily aesthetic as a recollection of the earth.<sup>25</sup>

23 Watsuji Tetsurō, *Fûdo, Wind und Erde. Der Zusammenhang zwischen Klima und Kultur*, Dora Fischer-Barnicol and Okochi Ryogi, trans. (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992). Watsuji Tetsurō, *Climate: A Philosophical Study*, Geoffrey Bownas, trans. (Tokyo: Ministry of Education, 1961 [1935]), 1. Watsuji Tetsurō, *Fûdo, le milieu humaine*, Commentaire et traduction par Augustin Berque (Paris: CNRS, 2011). We use the French *milieu* in English to refer to the body, thanks to the physiologist (and thoughtless vivisectionist), Claude Bernard.

24 Neto Leão, “Against *pax oecologica*,” *Conspiratio* (Fall 2022): 67-78.

25 I try to explore some of this in an essay on the question of technology that is



William Blake, Elohim Creating Adam, 1795. Public Domain.

The viscerality of Illich's references can be striking and he emphasizes this in the conversation David Cayley has preserved, thus he tells us that “earth is something you have to use all your senses to grasp, to feel. Earth is something that you can smell.”<sup>26</sup> It is this same aesthetic to which Illich has recourse to explain Hugh of St Victor's metaphors for the book as “a humble clay tablet, like Adam's body before the Creator breathed spirit into its face.”<sup>27</sup> Crucially, Illich combines elements, *fūdo* refers to soil — along with “the appropriate waters” — and Illich also uses

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always related to Illich with specific reference to Heidegger: Babich, “Heidegger on Technology and *Gelassenheit*: *wabi-sabi* and the Art of *Verfallenheit*,” *AI & SOCIETY. Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Communication* (August 2015): 1-10.

26 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi, 1992), 287.

27 Illich, *n the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 50.



the metaphor of sandiness to speak of his own aging body, “I feel completely sandy, washed out, dry.”<sup>28</sup>

### *Reading with the Body*

*In the Vineyard of the Text*, Illich details the monkish relation to the book,<sup>29</sup> relying not only on the rhythmic analyses of classical philology crucial to reading Latin (with its Western stress ictus) and ancient Greek (alien to us in the West, as Nietzsche argued as ancient Greek had only a pitch ictus),<sup>30</sup> but also for the training of memory.<sup>31</sup> In the same physiognomic fashion, Illich traces the letters themselves: edges, cuts, bodily forms. This physiognomics is crucial, Illich emphasizes, to the very singular invention of the Greek alphabet, as scholars “increasingly recognize that truly phonetic writing was a one-time invention, made in Greece around 770 B.C.”<sup>32</sup> Drawing on a range of other studies,<sup>33</sup> Illich reflects that ancient Greek had “no word for ‘a word’ singly identified.”<sup>34</sup> Key here would be the *physicality* of the articulated word, the word given breath. For Illich,

28 Illich, *Rivers*, 209.

29 Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 60-61.

30 I discuss this complicated notion in the last third of *The Hallelujah Effect* (London: Routledge, 2016 [2013]).

31 Illich, *Vineyard*, 41. This emphasis on bodily walking through or ‘running’ the memory palace distinguishes Illich’s account from more common readings of rhetoric (Mary Carruthers, Brian Vickers, even Francis Yates with her focus on Bruno). More on this below.

32 Illich, *Vineyard*, 39. Illich is too careful a historian not to note the complex limitation of script to a given language as such.

33 Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). It is well worth attending to Illich’s footnotes in both *The Mirror of the Past* and *In the Vineyard of the Text* for further references and these may be supplemented with Nietzsche on Greek prosody. For further references (to a convergent tradition): Babich, *Nietzsches Antike* (Berlin: Academia, 2021).

34 Illich, *Vineyard*, 39.

Greek had only various terms referring to sounds and other signals or expressions: utterances could be articulated by the lips, the tongue, or the mouth, but also by the heart when it spoke to the friend by the *thymos* (which we might call “gall”) which rose in Achilles and drove him into battle, or by the onrush of a wave of blood.<sup>35</sup>

Thus ancient Greek writing is literally a “recording technology” attuned to sound. It is the vehicle of an oral, an acoustic or specifically *hearing* culture for which it uses visual culture:

In fact, the alphabet is an elegant technology for the visualisation of sounds. Its two dozen shapes trigger the memory of utterances that have been articulated by the mouth, the tongue, *oi*: the lips and filter out what is said by gesture, mime, or the guts. Unlike other writing systems, it records sounds not ideas. And in this it is fool-proof: readers can be trained to voice things which they have never heard before.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, and here the haptic is key along with metonymy, Illich explains that preliterate “Greek speechmaking and epic singing were based not on visual memory but on the recollection of formulas uttered to the rhythm of a lyre.”<sup>37</sup>

The musicologist, Ernest McClain (1918-2014), draws attention to the same phenomenon in *The Pythagorean Plato*,<sup>38</sup> and he would later extend the point to the

35 Illich, *Vineyard*, 39.

36 Illich, *Vineyard*, 39.

37 Again, Nietzsche had made this case almost a century earlier. For his part, Illich refers to Berkley Peabody, *The Winged Word: A Study in the Technique of Ancient Greek Oral Composition as Seen Principally through Hesiod's Works and Days* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975).

38 Ernest McClain, *The Pythagorean Plato: Prelude to the Song Itself* (York Beach, Maine: Nicolas-Hays, 1978).

Hebrew bible.<sup>39</sup> Illich's point is philologically impeccable and already to be found in Aristotle:

Leucippus and his associate Democritus say that the full and the empty are the elements calling the one being and the other non-being: the full and solid being being the empty non-being. One substance (for them) generates all things ... and does so by three modifications, which are these: shape, order, and position. They say that the real is differentiated only by "rhythm" and "inter-contact" and "turning". Of these, rhythm is shape, inter-contact is order, and turning is position. A differs in shape from N. AN differs from NA in order. H differs from Z in position.<sup>40</sup>

Commenting on Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Antonio de Nicolàs (1930-2022) explains the ancient Greek tradition in its Platonic constellation in connection with music and mysticism as inspiring Ignatius' spiritual exercises of bodily attuned reading/imagination, arguing that

For the Greeks, the world resembled Apollo's lute. This was a visible image because for the Greeks *idea* and *eidos*, thinking and representation, were one inseparable act, a text in our sense. It was probably not only the so-called Pythagoreans, but Pythagoras himself who assumed a fourfold harmony in the world: the harmony of the strings, of the body and soul, of the state, of the starry sky.<sup>41</sup>

39 See, for an illustrated explication, McClain's "A Priestly View of Bible Arithmetic: Deity's Regulative Aesthetic Activity within Davidic Musicology," in Babich, ed., *Hermeneutic Philosophy of Science, Van Gogh's Eyes, and God: Essays on Patrick A Heelan, S.J.* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 429-444.

40 Ivan Illich, *Vineyard*, 39.

41 de Nicolás, *Powers of Imagining*, 21. Referring to McClain, we read: "Plato needs to be studied anew from the perspective of a dialectics conceived on a musical map that

Illich himself refers the reader to the French Jesuit ethno-linguist, Marcel Jousse (1886-1961) on orality and rhythm. This corresponds to the bodily mnemotechnics of prayer and its cultural antecedents:

When the child is rocked during a cradle song, when the reapers bow to the rhythm of a harvest song, when the rabbi shakes his head while he prays or searches for the right answer, or when the proverb comes to mind only upon tapping for a while — according to Jousse, these are just a few examples of a widespread linkage of utterance and gesture.<sup>42</sup>

The body also embraces reference to the friend and explicating Hugh of St. Victor, Illich writes: Friendship is the word in Hugh for that love of wisdom, which is *sapientia*, or tasteful knowledge. The friend is *paradisus homo*.<sup>43</sup> The bodily language of Illich's gloss is both mystical and sensual, needed to speak of the friend: "his very first presence is beatifying; friendship is a garden, a tree of life, wings for the flight to God ... Sweetness, light, fire, wound ... Paradise regained."<sup>44</sup>

### *Body Memory and the Money Changers: Hopscotch and Cartography*

In addition to the illumination of light in reading as well as the pronunciation that aided a slower "chewing" of the text,<sup>45</sup>

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preserves not only the musical model of the past but contributes a clear description of the technologies involved in the use of such a map." *Powers of Imagining*, 22.

42 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 34 985b, cited in Illich, *Vineyard*, 39.

43 Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 27.

44 Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 27.

45 See Illich's own text as well as Nietzsche on the need for hearing with one's eyes (reading aloud), but see also Paul Saenger, *Spaces Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

Illich emphasizes the bodily relation to the word.<sup>46</sup> Accounts of memory palaces are familiar to us, as noted above, even if poorly understood — one is meant to memorize a series of *loci*. Drawing in part on illustrations in Robert Fludd (1574-1637)<sup>47</sup> Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), Illich explains Hugh of St Victor's reference to the "treasure chest in your heart," Illich cites the "many hiding places in your heart: here for gold, there for silver, elsewhere again for precious stones ..."<sup>48</sup> The reference to the body is key:

You must learn to distinguish these spots to know which is where, in order to remember where you have placed this thing or that. Just observe the moneychanger in the market and do like him. See how his hand darts into the appropriate satchel ... and instantly draws out the right coin.<sup>49</sup>

The young monk learns to imagine a game of bodily 'hop-scotch,' as we may describe Illich's example,<sup>50</sup> learning to

place each Apostle into the row of Apostles, each Patriarch in the row of Patriarchs, and then trains him to dart back and forth between distinct columns. Certain sentences are used to train the memory, "mnemotechnic phrases." An example is: "In six days the world was perfectly created, and in six epochs man was redeemed." In Paris, one century before the university came into being and the year before the first preserved rudimentary al-

46 "Each reader, whether chanter or listener, understands the lines by moving to their beat, remembers them by recapturing their rhythm, and thinks of them in terms of putting them into his mouth and chewing." Illich, *Vineyard*.

47 Illich cites: Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmic maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica* (Oppenheimii: Ære Johan-Theodori de Bry, typis Hieronymi Galleri, 1617-21).

48 Illich, *Vineyard*, 35-36.

49 Illich, *Vineyard*, 36.

50 Illich, *Vineyard*, 41.

phabetic subject index was concocted, this was the training for reference work given to the child monk.<sup>51</sup>

The physiognomic is crucial and not a matter of mere encumbrance:

The child's mind was trained to build the memory mazes, and to establish the habit to dart and retrieve in them. Remembrance was not conceived as an act of mapping but of psychomotor, morally charged activity.<sup>52</sup>

For Illich, key to the mediaeval context is the "fundamental development by Hugh of the memory matrix from an architectonic static to a historic-relational model."<sup>53</sup> In this way, the spatial model, thus the reference to hopscotch, refers to a spatial transformation of a mentally constructed memory palace:

Hugh's rows of numbers that run to the horizon are a flat replica of the same device. To become the student of a reputable teacher, the pupil had to prove that he was at home and at ease in some vast architecture that existed only in his mind, and within which he could move at an instant to the spot of his choice.<sup>54</sup>

The physiological memory parallel Illich draws does not require faith or the medieval monastic tradition, one can have this digitally or by reading a book in more prosaic circumstances as a matter of cartography, provided the imagination is 'trained' as Illich mentions the topographical maps that had served him as a boy in Vienna, given to bodily undertakings: "As a modern youth, from childhood on I was trained to the

51 Illich, *Vineyard*, 36-37.

52 Illich, *Vineyard*, 37.

53 Illich, *Vineyard*, 38.

54 Illich, *Vineyard*, 41.

Baedeker. As a mountain guide I learned to decipher maps and photographs before venturing into the rock.”<sup>55</sup>

For Illich, the bodily is decisive for lived-world, “mapless orientation” and today, post GPS dependency and its syndromes, we may be less ‘qualified’ to orient ourselves in this way:

Decades later, when I first arrived in Japan, I purchased a map of Tokyo. But I was not allowed to use it. My host’s wife simply refused to let me map my way through the city’s mazes by looking at them, mentally, from above. Day after day she led me around this, and that corner, until I could navigate the labyrinth and reach my destinations without ever knowing abstractly where I was. Reference work before the table of contents and the index must have been much more like this kind of mapless orientation for which our modern schools disqualify us.<sup>56</sup>

55 Illich, *Vineyard*, 37.

56 Illich, *Vineyard*, 37.

## II. Water



Gustave Courbet, *La Source*, 1862.  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC.  
Public Domain.



Gustave Courbet, *La Source*, 1868.  
Musée D'Orsay, Paris.  
Public Domain.

*H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* begins with a striking claim using the history of art as evidence: “Only the late nineteenth century tied female nudity as a cultural symbol to the tap water of the bathroom.”<sup>57</sup> At issue are a range of 19<sup>th</sup> century paintings which Illich does not reproduce in his own text but detail for flattening out their subject and making an exception for Courbet’s *La Source*. Thus Illich explains:

57 Illich, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the Historicity of Stuff* (Dallas: Dallas Inst Humanities & Culture, 1985), 1.



The evolution of the subtle ties between water and the nude can be observed, in all its complexity, in the paintings of the period. The painter found it less and less necessary to justify the nude by presenting her in religious or mythological terms. By showing her as bather he could merge woman and water as part of “nature.” Only a rare genius such as Courbet could successfully paint *The Source* as a woman of incredible specificity, utterly lacking in self-consciousness yet bluntly assertive of her flesh.<sup>58</sup>

Whatever Courbet’s model might be about and whatever the symbolism of water, Illich’s “self-assertive” language can seem inaccurate at least from the point of view of the woman herself, whether to describe *her* own focus on her own flesh (she is turned away from the viewer) but corresponds to the painter’s/viewer’s viewpoint or assessment. Illich’s painterly referent is ambiguous as Courbet painted the same theme with the same name six years later, on display today in the Musée D’Orsay. In either case, the same qualification about bodily or fleshly self-assertion would hold.

Here, Illich’s audience may be puzzled — was Illich not a priest? How appropriate can it be for him, of all people, to be referencing nudes? The occasion for the lecture was a water processing plant newly commissioned in Dallas. The reference to the nude is a distraction and (apart from Courbet), Illich’s point is that

For the run-of-the-mill painter, this association of flesh with water served to render the feminine body innocuous. First, in the course of Ingres’s long life, the term nude became synonymous with the Turkish bath. Then the aging Degas filled his atelier with tubs, bowls, and basins in which to pose his models. His pastels offer a

58 Illich, *H2O*, 1.

historical source for the domestic bath during the late nineteenth century.<sup>59</sup>

What is at work for Illich, as historian, is a shift in consciousness:

The intertwining of urban water and the nude constitutes one of the strands of a taboo woven to protect the symbolism of public water use from analysis. We may, for instance, debate quite openly our selection of the architect who will dress up the stuff that runs through Dallas pipes. We feel free to criticize the way he displays it, makes it dance or sparkle. But we do not feel free to question the natural beauty of water itself because we know, yet cannot bear to acknowledge, that this “stuff” is recycled toilet flush.<sup>60</sup>

Invoking a traditionalist ethos regarding the female body, speaking of the “evolution of the subtle ties between water and the nude,” Illich’s point is that conventional depictions of the nude in the bath or in a water source are ways to represent the nakedness of female flesh.<sup>61</sup>

Illich refers to the traditions of water across different cultures and reflects on our myths and imaginaries in the wake of the chemist-philosopher, Gaston Bachelard’s *Water and Dreams*, as this was Illich’s prompt from the organizers of the 1984 Dallas conference. Given his scientific training, Illich reminds us that elementally, water is intrinsically dyadic.

59 Illich, *H2O*, 2.

60 Illich, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the Historicity of Stuff* (Dallas: Dallas Inst Humanities & Culture, 1985), 3.

61 Although he does not refer to Illich, I have had conversations with Alexander Nehamas about this distinction, see Nehamas, *A Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). See my discussion of the difference between artistic depictions of male/female bodies (and our assumptions) in the first third of Babich, *The Hallelujah Effect* (London: Routledge, 2016).

Here it is not only the molecular compound  $H_2O$  Illich has in mind, hydrogen and oxygen, but the ‘material’ or ‘stuff’ of water (the German for the element of hydrogen is *Wasserstoff*): “The substance that is considered ‘water’ or ‘fire’ varies with culture and epoch. And water is always dual.”<sup>62</sup> Thus Illich can remind us that the Vedic tradition of *soma* is a fluid *fire* and that eros and passion also refer to fire.

Primal as water is, Illich as historian, reminds us to ask about the cultural-historical aspects of our collective relation to water. Thus plumbing, not merely running water but water closets and toilets go back, along with the technology of the same, to the ancients. Setting modern technological accomplishments in context, Illich reminds his Dallas audience of the radical technological leap that was Roman engineering:

By A.D. 97, Rome had become a city of one million inhabitants. Nine major aqueducts with a total length of approximately 250 miles brought 100 gallons of water per capita into the city. How much water this is, one can grasp only by comparison. London, Frankfurt, and Paris had eight-tenths of a gallon per capita in 1823 and approximately ten gallons per capita in 1936. Rome in A.D. 100 used ten times this amount of piped water.<sup>63</sup>

Foregrounding the connection with toilets and other less salutary associations with water in connection with municipal water recycling plant,<sup>64</sup> Illich reflects that dwelling on such details, even the mere mention is bad enough, as we city dwellers, with our municipal water, inevitably shower or

62 Illich, *H2O*, 4.

63 Illich, *H2O*, 36-37.

64 See also for a video of this address given in Texas for the Dallas Institute in 1984, “Ivan Illich on Water and the History of the Senses,” <https://youtu.be/BrT08kPdIRg>.

bathe in “recycled toilet flush.”<sup>65</sup> Thus ‘the waters of forgetfulness’ of Illich’s complete title refers to the body and all its traces as what is to be elided. Today, most of us have become migrants in our own lives, dwelling nowhere:

Most people do not dwell in the place where they spend their days and leave no traces in the place where they spend their nights. They spend their days next to a telephone in an office and their nights garaged next to their cars.<sup>66</sup>

The obligation to pay a rent or a mortgage for a home is new, as Illich reminds us, for everyone *including* the poor who formerly could live rent free, as Illich emphasizes, in slums and ramshackle dwellings. Illich spends considerable time analysing the dynamic architectonics of the favela. Recalling a landscape of polluted rivers, Illich highlights the architecture of underdevelopment which corporate development paves over, adding new problems along the way:

That landscape no longer exists; cars now fill a highway hiding the sewage. The skin and scalp of Indians is no longer the habitat of lice; now the allergies produced by industrial chemicals cause the itch.<sup>67</sup>

Nevertheless, like Joni Mitchell’s ‘clouds’, what we remember about water (thus forgetfulness) is what the popular mind allows. Thus, Illich draws our attention to the signifiers of modern (and often commercial) dreams of water:

The popular wisdom which holds that water possesses “natural beauty” and that this beauty has impact on civic

65 Illich, *H2O*, 3.

66 Illich, *H2O*, 10.

67 Illich, “Conspiracy,” 238.

morale is not always overtly expressed. However, you have only to poke fun at the belief in the civic magic of a body of water, and people react as if you had made a dirty joke.<sup>68</sup>

Both images are specifically historical constructions requiring a specific hermeneutic:

This, I claim, is so because water, which has always been perceived as the feminine element of nature, in the nineteenth century was tied to a new “hygienic” image of woman, which was itself a creation of the Victorian age.<sup>69</sup>

This in turn gives us a hint of the waters Illich will invoke to speak of his death, of our deaths,

Following dream waters upstream, the historian will learn to distinguish the vast register of their voices. As his ear is attuned to the music of deep waters, he will hear a discordant sound that is foreign to waters, that reverberates through the plumbing of modern cities. He will recognize that the H<sub>2</sub>O which gurgles through Dallas plumbing is not water, but a stuff which industrial society creates.<sup>70</sup>

Here at issue is a symbolic and real (and thus Lacanian) interface:

Pleasure boats, temperatures, and the reflection of skyscrapers are not my concern here. I want to deal with waters and dreams. I want to explore the moral and psychological consequences that will flow from the public display of recirculated toilet flush with pretends to the aesthetic symbol of a wedding between water and urban space.<sup>71</sup>

68 Illich, *H2O*, 2.

69 Illich, *H2O*, 2.

70 Illich, *H2O*, 5.

71 Illich, *H2O*, 9.

Highlighting the accretionary, dynamic character of life for most of humanity throughout most of its past, Illich, without referring to Heidegger's *Being, Dwelling, Thinking* makes part of the point Heidegger makes for the sake of which Illich refers to time:

Traditional dwellings are never terminated. Houses constantly grow; only temples and palaces can be "finished." Dwelling means living insofar as each moment shapes a community's own kind of space. "Dwelling" in this strong sense cannot really be distinguished from living. From day-to-day dwellers shape the environment. In every step and movement people dwell.<sup>72</sup>

Here I am concerned with Illich's account of life and the destruction of and the recurrence again, and this is true to the current day, of the *favela*:

Yet it is due perhaps to this incongruity that a *favela* once established does not go away just because its site has been bulldozed. Within weeks, even overnight, the same *favela* will be there again. If you watch in the evening after sunset, a hundred families will climb over the barricades carrying poles, mats, and infants. By dawn, dozens of women will emerge from the wobbly shelters to line up — as they have always done — and fill their buckets at the nearby spigot. For the most part, they will be different people from those who have just been carted away. Not the same people, perhaps, but the same *favela* has returned to its visible life.<sup>73</sup>

72 Illich, *H2O*, 9.

73 Illich, *H2O*, 19.

Illich is not a romantic and cement works a charm as always:

When a parking lot is built or public housing rises on the site, the squatter can return no more. The ancients believed in their power to undo ritual space; they knew that it was a social creation. Architects can only condemn it and bury it under cement. And, as the world is cemented over, dwelling space is extinguished. It survives only in cracks and niches. Most people are forced to acquire costly space in which they cannot dwell.<sup>74</sup>

If Illich can explain, drawing on theology and ancient gnostic myth to do so:

The distinction between purification and cleansing is obvious yet difficult to clarify. The late archaic transformation of miasma in Greece, followed by the gnostic tradition and baptismal theology, has jumbled purifying blessing and detergent scrubbing under the emblem of “water” that determines modern sensibilities.<sup>75</sup>

The ‘waters of forgetfulness’ are ontic affairs, as Heidegger would say, as plumbing disposes of the products of digestion along with dust and mud and fatigue of everyday life:

In contrast with this negative reference to the condition that calls for purification, Indo-Germanic languages possess a rich register for referring to the conditions that require cleansing. “Miasma” that can be washed away is given in bold and direct terms as something that sticks to the skin, such as soil (soiled), shit (a word that comes from the same root as “dirt” and “dirty”), foul things (filthy), dung (from Old Germanic *quat*, *Kot*), glue or sap (*sucio*, *sudicio*)

74 Illich, *H2O*, 19.

75 Illich, *H2O*, 27-28.

or mud (Irish loth, from the same root as Latin *lutum*).<sup>76</sup>

The body produces the ‘miasma’ that needs to be purified and which, as we are bodily beings, we are especially apt in sensing as water: “acts as a solvent (it ab-solves), detaches these leftovers of past activities and disengages the person from an encumbrance.”<sup>77</sup>

Here the reference, again, is to Illich’s phrasing of the ‘rivers north of the future,’ bodily death as traditionally connected with the river *Lethe*:

All mythic waters feed a source that is located on the other side. The streams carry the memories that Lethe has washed from the feet of the dead to this well thereby turning dead men into mere shadows.<sup>78</sup>

Important for hermeneutics, memory is the adoptive mother of Hermes,<sup>79</sup> god of mediations, transitions, the companion god who moves soul from the land of the living to the land of the dead, who communicates between gods and mortals: “Even the immortals must draw on the waters of his titanic mother if they want to remember.”<sup>80</sup>

### III. Air: Aura and Smell, Atmosphere and Spirit

A philosopher of aura and bodily atmosphere, Illich talks about smells, shocking readers by telling them not about the aura about which Walter Benjamin writes, mystically, indirectly (although Benjamin’s description is just as physically

76 Illich, *H2O*, 28.

77 Illich, *H2O*, 28.

78 Illich, *H2O*, 31.

79 It is memory who adopts the son of Maya, the “shamefaced” or “awful” nymph, and thus makes him the son of two mothers. She provides Hermes with his two unique gifts: a lyre and “soul.” Illich, *H2O*, 31-32.

80 Illich, *H2O*, 32.



visceral as he writes of the smell of old books or artifacts), but the nose, a favoured metaphor for Illich, “a wandering Jew and a Christian pilgrim.”<sup>81</sup> We need a nose, Illich tells us, “to sense an aura”:

The nose, framed by the eyes, runs below the brain. What the nose inhales ends in the guts; every yogi and hesichast knows this. The nose curves down in the middle of the face. Pious Jews are conscious of the image because what the Christians call “walking in the sight of God” the Hebrews express as “ambling under God’s nose and breath.” To savor the feel of a place, you trust your nose; to trust another, you must first smell him.<sup>82</sup>

The reference to the yogi or the hesychast (think the monks on Mount Athos) is esoteric enough but Illich links the two, just as he reminds us that asceticism is repetition, as the body-builder knocks out reps or divides his week into days to focus on exercising one part of the body, to allow the rhythm of growth. In the same way, Illich illuminates what he means by atmosphere, this is the element of air, along with the dangers of institutionalization.

*In the Vineyard of the Text* is dedicated to the atmosphere of the monastery and to this extent, the “hesychast” is not a casual reference. Recalling the different stations, “epochs,” in his own life, Illich explains,

I have never doubted—and it’s even more true today—that a “monastic” ambience is the prerequisite to the independence needed for a historically based indictment of society.<sup>83</sup>

81 Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 147.

82 Illich, “Conspiracy,” 237. See further, my discussion of “L’atmosphère, le parfum et la politique de l’utopie : Lucien, Nietzsche, et Illich,” *Diogène. Revue internationale des sciences humaines*, n° 273-274 (janvier-juin 2021 [2022]):124-146.

83 Illich, “Conspiracy,” 235.



Albert Joseph Moore, *The Loves of the Winds and the Seasons*, 1863. Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery. Public Domain.

The body and its aura, its airs, its atmospheric element, permeates Illich's reflections in his 1998 "The Cultivation of Conspiracy" as he also muses on the sensed *genius loci* of various places —not only monastic installations or his youthful sojourns on the islands around the Dalmatian coastline, but Illich confesses the utopic longing that is an accompaniment to the onset of age, musing (at his own expense), joking to a Bremen audience who lives where he lives (and knows what he is talking about), of the contrast, walking

through the pastures along the Wümme that are flooded twice a day by the tide from the North Atlantic? I who, as a boy, had felt exiled in Vienna, because all my senses were longingly attached to the South, to the blue Adriatic, to the limestone

mountains in the Dalmatia of my early childhood.<sup>84</sup>

This is a rhetorical device used by a long expert preacher, speaker. Thus the 'atmosphere' of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Lucian inspires Goethe when the poet asks (in Pindar's voice) if one "knows the land, where the lemons blossom."<sup>85</sup>

Illich's references to aura and atmosphere are crucial as he explains some of the reasons that would lead him to dissolve the institution he had founded, his "'thinkery' [*Denkerei*]" in Mexico, ... the Centro Intercultural de Documentación or CIDOC."<sup>86</sup> Here the element of air offers another reference to aura, to spirit. The dynamic is both inevitable and elusive:

...atmosphere invites the institutionalization that will corrupt it. You never know what will nurture the spirit of *philia*, while you can be certain what will smother it. Spirit emerges by surprise, and it's a miracle when it abides; it is stifled by every attempt to secure it; it's debauched when you try to use it.<sup>87</sup>

Illich emphasizes the faint memory the nose detects, an 'aura' that reminds one of a given evening, old companions, or simply the taste of wine. The aura remains and that requires the

84 Illich, "Conspiracy," 234.

85 "Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen, Im dunkeln Laub die Goldorangen glühen, Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht, Die Myrte still und hoch der Lorbeer steht, Kennst du es wohl? Dahin! Dahin! Möchte' ich mit dir, o mein Geliebter, ziehn!" Cited after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, in Goethe, *Les Œuvres de Goethe, Vollständige Ausgabe letzter Hand, Erster Band* (Stuttgart et Tübingen, in der J.G.Cottaschen Buchhandlung, 1827), 177. For a discussion, see, broadly and just as bodily: Martina Kolb, "Goethe's Citrus, Nietzsche's Figs, and Benn's Olive: Poetic Reverie, Erotic Fantasy, and Botanic Agency," *Monatshefte*, Vol. 106, n° 2 (été 2014) : 171-199 and on the halcyonic, it is useful to consult the final chapter of Gary Shapiro, *Alcyone. Nietzsche on Gifts, Noise, and Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

86 Illich, "Conspiracy," 236.

87 Illich, "Conspiracy," 236.

sense of smell. Here there is a shock to our sensibilities, linguistic but also visceral:

Some of that sense of mimesis comes out in an old German adage, *Ich kann Dich gut riechen* (I can smell you well), which is still used and understood. But it's something you don't say to just anyone; it's an expression that is permissible only when you feel close, count on trust, and are willing to be hurt.<sup>88</sup>

In his Chicago lecture on “Hospitality and Pain” Illich offers a complex reading of the relationship not only to this vulnerability but pain, crucial as he begins by citing Homer's *Odyssey* to remind us of the difficulty of recognizing those to whom we owe hospitality, as the poet tells us that under the disguise of the aged body, accurate recognition becomes impossible.<sup>89</sup> In the same text, Illich emphasizes the bodily service owed to the sick. This attention to the complexities of vulnerability is part of the reason the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben suggests we would do well to read Illich during the current political circumstance that is the global change in rule and power in the name of supposed ‘security.’<sup>90</sup> Blocking bodily proximity and contact as we have done and as some are still inclined to do: wearing a mask, avoiding physical connection with others, is not only a bodily avoidance but a spiritual avoidance. Illich stresses this willingness “to be hurt,” required for friendship as for Illich's vocational, priestly attention to those who would

88 Illich, “Conspiracy,” 237.

89 Illich, “Hospitality and Pain,” Lecture, f David Ramage of McCormick Theological Seminary, 1987. Online: [https://www.unifr.ch/orthodoxia/de/assets/public/Lehre/FS2021%20-%20Seminar%20Illich/Illich\\_Hospitality.pdf](https://www.unifr.ch/orthodoxia/de/assets/public/Lehre/FS2021%20-%20Seminar%20Illich/Illich_Hospitality.pdf).

90 Giorgio Agamben, *Where are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, Veleria Dani, trans. (London: Eris Press, 2021). Cf. Babich, “Pseudo-Science and ‘Fake’ News: ‘Inventing’ Epidemics and the Police State” in: Irene Strasser and Martin Dege, eds., *The Psychology of Global Crises and Crisis Politics Intervention, Resistance, Decolonization* (London: Springer, 2021), 241-272.

count as ‘the least of our brethren.’

This is worth reflecting on, in the context of the same Illich who wrote *Medical Nemesis* to articulate the politics of a profession of a health industry that set surveillance, i.e., regular check-ups, or regimens of tests, in place of curative treatments or healing. During the past few years, the peoples of the world were subjected to the probing invasion of our noses to a degree and on a scale never seen on earth. It remains hard to imagine that ‘we’ subjected ourselves, and still do, on command, to a set of protocols which remains inscrutable. What were pre-prepared swabs soaked with?, what were they made of, what what was the depth of their insertion?, what was the number of times they were to be rotated inside nasal passages? From the standpoint of the body, these were all elemental and elementary questions left unanswered. None of them drew more than superficial attention. Today, although some philosophers are beginning to pay attention to the sense of smell, none raised an alarm during the pandemic. It is an issue complicated by the fact that the damage done by such bodily violation is not registered as such because one gets used to violations which are repeated. Moreover, as the damage is mostly cognitive, it is that much more difficult to notice injury. Yet, for those who have lost their sense of smell, the loss is often irrecoverable, and the intellectual capacity lost thereby correspondingly hard to estimate.

Illich’s bodily-political point has everything to do with proximity and smell, which is also, as already noted, connected with aura. The kiss of peace in the celebration of the mass — Illich adds a discussion of priestly kisses of the bible, of relics, of rings, of other clerics, of the faithful, as all this requires the intimate sharing of breath. As he explains:

the *conjuratio conspirativa* makes European urbanity distinct from urban modes elsewhere. It also implies a peculiar dynamic strain between the atmosphere of *con-*

*spiratio* and its legal, contractual constitution. Ideally, the spiritual climate is the source of the city's life that flowers into a hierarchy, like a shell or frame, to protect its order. Insofar as the city is understood to originate in a *conspiratio*, it owes its social existence to the *pax*, the breath, shared equally among all.<sup>91</sup>

The rigor of Illich's historian's reading can escape us, hence the significance of the economic context in the present day as described by Leão's account. If our efforts to improve and institutionalize improvement tend toward "totalitarianism" as Huxley and Orwell have already taught us, Illich reminds us of a complex "*pax*" that cannot be separated from convivial life and for which our new masked order cannot but augur ill. The element of air is clear in this *pax*, insofar as it entails "the breath, shared equally by all."<sup>92</sup> Everything turns on what Illich calls *Umsonstigkeit* — the free, mysterious, and above all unmerited gift of grace.

#### IV. Fire

Illich, a priest, also invokes bodies of fire, the same angels William Blake saw in his trees and which were discounted by those around him as the kind of thing only poets see.

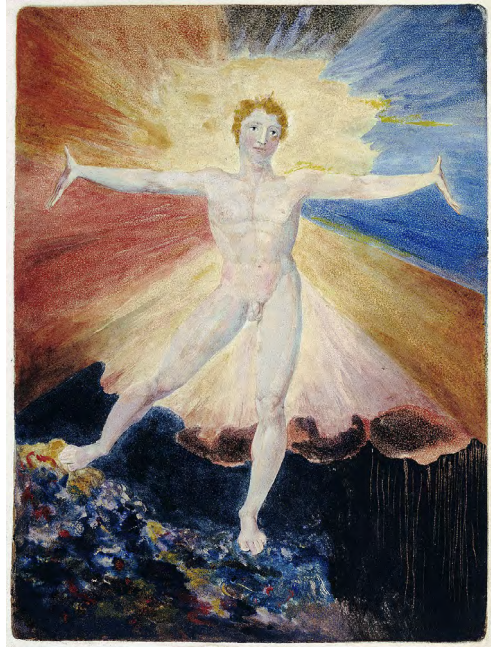
But fire is also connected with aether and thus with beings beyond the air. This is the heavenly as we may imagine the after-life, beyond the earthly. "Angels," Illich tells us, reminding us of our theology, "are pure spirits."<sup>93</sup> Elementally,

They have no *materia*; they're not juicy beings. They are beings of pure fire, an extraordinary fire which is taken from God. So these beings had to be given *media*,

91 Illich, "Conspiracy," 242.

92 Illich, "Conspiracy," 242.

93 Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 74.



William Blake, Glad Day or The Dance of Albion, ca.1794. From Blake, A Large Book of Designs, Copy A, 1793-6. Public Domain.

intermediaries, means by which they could influence the area of material reality which they were to govern. These were called the heavenly bodies. And in order to allow the immaterial angel to make contact with reality through the spheres, the spheres had to be conceived as a special type of *causa efficiens*, which was totally obedient to the intentional user, who is the angel.<sup>94</sup>

Illich goes on to offer a distinction between blessings as anyone may offer these and sacraments as these require specific instruments and have, if done correctly, at least as medieval theologians

94 Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 74-75.

supposed, the power to 'constrain' deity: "*instrumenta divina*."<sup>95</sup>

Bodies of fire corresponds to the aethereal, the angelic body and Illich gives us more with his repeated reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan and the beaten Jew left for dead in a ditch. For Illich, faith can allow one the confidence in the resurrection. Here we are still on the theme of the body, exemplified by his remembrance of Savonarola as exemplar of a good death, or as Nietzsche would say in a classically Greek voice, a "free death." Illich has taken care to remind us of Savonarola's caution to his monks that the death we are to die is not ours to specify but it is ours to die: "We are not masters of our own deaths. We must be happy if we can die the death which God has destined for us."<sup>96</sup> Illich, the historian, explains, the turns of his argument as logically subtle as ever, that:

either these are cowards, or they are people dominated by cultural assumptions in popular religiosity in Florence in 1498, or they are, in the fullest, in the most glorious way, clowns, fools, who know what they are doing.<sup>97</sup>

Thus Illich concludes with the hope of one who understands, and his point could not be more beautifully esoteric, "I wish I could die that way."

95 Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 79.

96 Savonarola, cited in Illich, "The Last Days of Savonarola," *In the Rivers North of the Future*, 155.

97 Illich, "The Last Days of Savonarola," *In the Rivers North of the Future*, 156.