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Quotes

Only the book matters, such as it is, far from genres, outside of categories — prose, poetry, novel, testimony — under which it refuses to be classed, and to which it denies the ability to assign its place and determine its form. A book no longer belongs to a genre; every book belongs to literature alone, as if literature possessed beforehand, in their generality, the secrets and formulae that alone allow what is written to assume the reality of a book. It seems as if genres have vanished, and literature alone asserted itself, gleamed solitary in the mysterious clarity that it propagates, and which each literary creation reflects by multiplying it — as if there were, in short, an “essence” of literature. But the essence of literature is precisely to escape any essential determination, any assertion that stabilizes it or even realizes it: it is never already there; it always has to be rediscovered or reinvented.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*

Writing as the question of writing, a question that bears writing that bears the question, no longer allows you this relation to being — understood first as tradition, order, certainty, truth, all forms of rootedness — which one day you received from worlds past, a domain that you were called to administer the better to strengthen your “Ego,” even though it had as it were cracked open, the day the sky opened onto its emptiness.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*
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PRICELESS
Beauty, Ugliness, & Politics

BY ANNIE LE BRUN

Translated by Jocelyne Geneviève Barque and John Galbraith Simmons
Today the time has come when human and natural catastrophes combine to obliterate the future. And the premier consequence of such an amalgam is that, in hoping to somehow contain the damage, both real and symbolic, we fail to look beyond it and see the abyss toward which we seem inevitably headed.

Continuous acceleration of events makes it ever more difficult to parse cause and effect. “Reality overload,” as I described it some eighteen years ago as a consequence of commercialization run amok, is inseparable from the “information superhighway” with its surfeit of things, glut and sprawl of images, and countervailing signs.¹ The result is an enormous mass of total insignificance that invades, occupies, and aggregates, with its own excess operating as a form of censorship.

The fact is that too much reality soon creates an unmanageable overabundance. In point of fact, in addition to nuclear, chemical, and organic waste, and detritus from every sort of mass production, there must now be added, amidst the vast discharge, the inordinate flood of beliefs, laws and ideas set adrift like carcasses and empty shells. If there’s one clear characteristic of the 21st century thus far, it’s that such things are without substance. Yet we have no idea how to process or think about them, much less get rid of them.

Disfigurement and defilement of the world, as a result, continues unabated but outside conscious awareness. Beyond various spectacular vexations, on every continent we now find that space is brutalized. The warp and weave of life is misshapen and distorted, massively yet insidiously afflicting our own mental landscapes.

Whether we like it or not, the situation holds much political significance. Consider that vibrant, genuine beauty, although perhaps impossible to define, can nonetheless shine blazing light upon the world, upending and even remaking it. Note too that the central totalitarian regimes of the 20th century hunted down works of art that were powered by that luminosity, aiming to impose a palpable sense of terror. Nazi “art” and Stalinist socialist realism shared an essentially interchangeable outlook. Both employed moralistic kitsch to affirm the supposed immorality of “degenerate” art and they also called upon the human body to bear false witness

in favor of their ideological lies. With few exceptions, even social revolutionaries paid scant attention to the family resemblance between these two brands of disaster and were concerned still less by their repercussions. All of which helps explain why, since the end of the Second World War, ugliness has enjoyed an open road.

More than ever, over the past twenty years, artistic productions (plastic and performing arts alike) have aided and abetted this process of uglification. Supported and sponsored, often at great cost, many of them often bear the dubious pretense of being ever more shocking and subversive; but, in fact, they simply reveal ongoing and thorough abasement. And as concurrent demonstration of such false consciousness, there also arises the production of counterfeit beauty designed to serve commercial aesthetics that some would like to see as the mark of “artistic capitalism.”

Apparently contradictory circumstances like this reveal, by way of increasing trivialization, a process of neutralization. It operates with the aim of bringing about acceptance of all things (and their opposites) while consistently eradicating any trace of negative thinking. It would be too simple to think, following Stendhal, that “beauty is nothing but the promise of happiness” and ugliness the result of misfortune. To hold such a belief today runs the risk of being blind to the new aesthetic-ization of the world, which most people tend to welcome but which, in fact, does nothing but devastate and extort society from top to bottom, inducing unprecedented desensitization. The production of art shows, performances and installations in theaters, museums, arts centers and foundations ends by producing cynicism that goes hand-in-hand with indifference.

The consequence of all this is a brazen and cynical order of denial. It can only end by calling into question all these various forms of representation that devalue one another by way of an imploding chain-reaction. The result is total disillusion. So much so that people are gradually stripped of any sensitive relationship to the world and in the end find themselves lonely and deprived. In the hope of escaping such isolation, there arises a sense of false community astride a new kind of servitude that produces fortunes

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3 Stendhal, Love (Penguin Classics) ch. 17.
for “social media.” Can it possibly be that, to escape exclusion, we should all be by this means tamed and domesticated?

Something is abroad today that is almost impossible for people to grasp — not so much uncertainty in facing the present and future but, rather, the sensation of dreams slipping away. It’s as though we no longer have any way to express or even think about the deepening chasm between our lived experience and the language to articulate it — and this to such an extent that no social critique, rigorous though it might be, can provide more than background noise or offer any relief except, for those who share it, a clear conscience. With crisis the constant topic of debate, the various critical approaches seem to do nothing but play into the hands of domination. Those who offer them, although happy to oblige, appear unaware of the role they play. The more they talk, the less they share the same language. As a result, instead of an emergent critique of crisis, we observe a crisis of criticism.

How might reflection on the current state of beauty, and the threats it faces, permit escape from this dispiriting situation? Consider that even if no one knows how to define it, each of us at some time has encountered beauty’s power to astonish and overwhelm, to inject meaning where previously there seemed to be none. Beauty, just as lightning strikes, will not countenance captivity and for that very reason can’t be simply lost or forgotten in consequence of events. Recall Rimbaud, famously, at the opening of A Season in Hell: “One evening I sat Beauty on my knees — And I found her bitter — And I reviled her.”4 Reading those lines, you must wonder how to square them with the seemingly contradictory conclusion, at the end of this same poem of self-discovery: “At last I know how to salute beauty.”

What transpired between April and August 1873, the period during which Rimbaud composed his famous “Season in Hell”? The question long bothered me — until now. With the current situation so clearly worsening, I’ve come to wonder whether Rimbaud’s sudden change of heart during the darkest of times could not provide for us today a sort of recourse, even remedy. For it was as if, after having taken every risk to steer clear of beauty’s too-well-

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trod den paths, Rimbaud suddenly saw how there is invariably beauty that is other — a beauty that, like the kind of love he imagined, is always there to be reinvented. He discerned it, as he wrote, in "silly paintings, street performance, raucous vulgarity, dirty books, childish ditties" not to forget "the felicity of beasts" and "all the eruptions and disasters" through which, in his madness, he rode as though upon cresting waves. So in the end he pays tribute to beauty because he discovers it not to be something so plural as it is singular and uncapitalized; and his genius was to grasp beauty in all its surging violence, to run ahead of it across the "deserts of love" and thrust himself upon it beneath a "clear sky gone dark." He could discover it even when he could no longer recognize himself — at the same time affirming "I am other." He opened beauty’s unique sovereignty to all.

We owe a further debt to Rimbaud: he underscored the importance for everybody "to find place and precept" and points to its urgency at the very moment when he denounces, by the savage truth of his vision and a century and a half in advance of what we’re faced with today, "our economic horrors" and "vision by numbers" of the universe arising therefrom to sell "bodies without price, outside any race, any world, any sex, seed, or stock!" Which goes on to sell, too, "the voices and immense and unquestionable riches," of that which can never be sold.

In fact, considering all that makes us heirs to France’s unsavory and repugnant Second Empire — financial speculation, colonization, plunder — there’s nothing Rimbaud didn’t cast into the fire by his refusal. So much so that he saw take shape, amidst those flames, the surprising beauty of possibility. Unpredictable and indefinable, this beauty shines forth to instill itself within the void, creating room for the inrush of imagination. Inseparable from the revolt that gives birth to it, the imagination returns time and again to give birth to freedom beyond hope. What Rimbaud said, dreamed, and revealed continues, more than a century later, to resonate with the young who’ve not yet given up or given in. Rimbaud was said to be the first to have risked everything to "change life." It’s compelled me to summon him now, confronted with the sinister onset of this century — even though he seems to have been pointedly neglected. But we should not forget him or others like him who, in spite of every
obstacle, manage to extract, as Pierre Reverdy suggested, "the source from the rock."\(^5\) Or that exemplary success can persuades us, with Ignaz Troxler, that “there exists another world but it’s got to be found in the one we’ve got.”\(^6\)

There’s no better justification needed to refuse the accepted order of things than the eruption of the possible and the beauty that might thereby emerge. From George Orwell’s 1984: “Almost as swiftly as he had imagined it, she had torn her clothes off, and when she flung them aside it was with that same magnificent gesture by which a whole civilization seemed to be annihilated.”

Beauty enmeshed with poetry, with something that is "nothing from nowhere," as Reverdy puts it and "the manifestation of the irrepressible human desire to be free.” Osip Mandelstam paid with his life for just such certainty. He wrote that people must have poetry “To keep them forever awake / And bathe them in the bright-haired wave of its breath.”\(^7\)

Examples of such an exalted mad quest for what’s *priceless* could be readily multiplied. Few among those who sought it ever abandoned their desire for it, set against the flickering light of an eternal present. The surge of attendant beauty, with its unpredictable horizons, continually disturbs the entrenched powers because it is exactly the thing they want to destroy and take away from us, down to the very memory of it.

I can only wonder how long we can afford to remain indifferent and to what extent we contribute to it, if only by inattention. How long shall we ignore the establishment of a new kind of servitude if not thorough corruption and dissolution?


\(^6\) The Swiss philosopher (1780–1866) Troxler was a student of Schelling and Hegel, and this citation has been attributed to Yeats, Rilke, and especially, to Paul Eluard.

Since the moment when André Breton wrote: “The marvelous is always beautiful,” the marvelous has established itself and, to consider only fantastic literature, our time, where we pretend to be a prisoner of a neo-naturalism generally qualified as abject and subject to the influence of an American literature from which are excluded, as we know, Melville, Poe, Hawthorne (and soon Faulkner), this time, so
occupied with itself, so eager to observe, to describe, if not to understand what happens in the world, nevertheless every month a dozen books appear whose subject matter is that which does not happen, that which the eyes do not see, that which the wisdom of the newspapers do not know. We can note, recently published, more than 30 volumes wherein the extraordinary, not that which is common, is expressed, but an uncommon form of the extraordinary, and, this list, it should doubtless be doubled to make it complete.

Naturally, the lovers of explanations don’t bother to tell us that such a fact is normal, that literature, which is elsewhere invaded by the great concerns of history, plays its part by turning away from reality and time and the world, that it is always so in the aftermath of the shocks and on the eve of cataclysms. It’s highly possible. We know nothing. We will note, however, that most “marvelous” books, if they belong to that literature of the bad genre, called escape literature, favor only the escape of the author and hardly that of the reader, because unlimited imagination bores (said Walter Scott in chiding Hoffmann).

To everyone else, the marvelous is but a word, and under this word come works of different form and quality. If we were to classify them by species, — a classification that would have the interest of a superficial means of recognition, — they would each resist and seek to proudly separate themselves from every other. We should also see how works of pure fantasy are rare, we mean works that may be full of meaning, but that that meaning does not precede, but rather hides their intentions behind the movement of a totally gratuitous imagination. It is striking that, in many of these stories, the extraordinary is brought about through genuine, theosophical, or metapsychical experiences, more or less distinctly denoted, or again they refer to an occult knowledge of a magickal or traditional order that appears in a naturally very dark background. The type of these works is the great novel of J. Anker Larsen, The Philosopher’s Stone, where are recounted the vicissitudes of a spirit that wastes its gifts in researches that are, it must be said, rather mediocre. All those who have read the works of Henri Bosco know also on what part the series of his books about a perfectly happy fantasy alternately open and close with a discretion which is here the rule, since seriousness is represented by an esoteric tradition that the masses cannot attain without
losing themselves and without losing it; but, finally, the symbols themselves speak and are sufficiently obstinate to reveal themselves even in a humorous book like Bosco’s *Monsieur Carre-Benoît à la campagne*, a book in which the invisible world never ceases to be present among the puppets who ignore it and disappear without realizing to what power they owe their fall. It is also very significant that the book of a young writer, Raymond Abellio, *Heureux les Pacifiques*, is at first a kind of political action, conforming to the literary canons of the day, with all the required references to events of the last 10 years, and ends up in a confused initiatic adventure, naïve enough, but remaining no less curious, because the author takes it seriously and it takes place on the edge of recent political facts and not in a timeless setting or in a mystical land as in Bosco’s work.

It goes without saying that literature plays its part in such stories of experience, nevertheless written with a manifest concern for truth (as it appears in *The Philosopher’s Stone*). But it is difficult to give to literature its part, and we see it take hold of the theosophical assertions and use them as a convenient framework to reflect truths of a very different order or only the images of a moralistic fantasy. This is what happens in Aldous Huxley’s *Time Must Have a Stop*, where the hours after death are described in the most brilliant manner, but for the benefit of a thesis that gives rise to such descriptions rather than being inspired by them. It’s what appears again in the novel of a young English writer, Francis Askham, *The Heart Consumed*, in which ghostly existence leads to all sorts of ingenious variations on future times, to an irony that has the charm and the gratuitousness of spectral life, which no one believes in any more.

All such books, however strange their frameworks are, have great realistic concerns. As we know, it is a common rule: the more the extraordinary is deployed, the more the ordinary is called upon to serve as its guarantee. About a century ago, Mérimée wrote to Édouard Delessert: “It must not be forgotten that, when one recounts something supernatural, one cannot over-multiply the details of material reality. It’s the great art of Hoffmann in his fantastic tales. Remember the Germans you saw, or rather a German, how she knitted, whether it was white or black stockings, how she arranged her tea table, not forgetting the bread or butter. Try in a few words to fix the place of the scene, here the table, there the chimney, the door
opposite, the chairs arranged in such and such a manner, etc. Rabelais says that one must always lie in an odd number. It’s the great lesson that he gives to novelists.” And Mérimée, in the mouth of Rabelais again, places again this precept: “Every great lie needs a very precise detail, by means of which it convinces.”¹

Processes may be excellent. But it must be understood that, if the best imaginary works of our time seem to confirm them, to the point that we do not always know if we love them for what they contain of madness or for their realistic appearance, in truth the spirit born of such works is in absolute disagreement with the principles of Mérimée and refutes them, rejects them in the most vigorous manner. It is clear that even for Hoffmann the interpretation of Mérimée is at fault. No doubt, such fantastic tales place a great deal of importance on reality, but it is not to render real what in such tales is not, nor is it a precaution of the artist’s, nor the subterfuge of a rational man. For Hoffmann — and the most distracted of his readers know it — the imaginary experience takes place on the plane of the most everyday reality, the one that he sees and the one that he lives. The fantastic occurs normally; it is a fantastic in white or black stockings, with a face that is common, because it is his everyday existence which reveals the fantastic to him. It is quite evident that reality is not there to guarantee extravagance, but it is there because it is the very place of the irreal that constantly interrupts it, rips it open, which is its profound manifestation and guarantee. The unbelievable is the truth of the real — that is the meaning of every fantastic tale that warrants our participation and our trust.

“What is admirable in the fantastic is that nothing fantastic remains: there is only the real.” Who does not remember these lines from the First Manifesto of Surrealism? They perfectly refute Mérimée’s remarks. However, in order to hear them well, it is necessary to remember that the fantastic is perhaps accepted by everyone, but that the writer never takes it for granted, that it is neither a question of fable, nor of decor, nor of characters, nor of tradition, nor even of intention. Of course, there is a rhetoric of the marvelous, and this rhetoric is not only made of old ruined castles and old disillusioned specters, but today, among its safest ingredients are themes, images,

and the language of an entirely domesticated surrealism. This rhetoric is not without interest; it may, contrarily, be preferred to all rational novels, stories wherein the incredible obeys rules without any proof; it’s a very legitimate, and even honorable, preference. But it must be added that the fantastic, the marvelous, have most of the time nothing to do with the stories that appear to do so and that, if such stories have a fabulous character, it’s precisely because those who wrote them have never encountered or experienced the fabulous in its truthful aspect.

Where the fantastic is, there is only the real. If that is true, it also follows that, in a work where the fantastic appears, it is because we are dealing only with its lie, a simulacra perhaps impressive and perhaps inevitable, but foreign to the proper nature of the fantastic that is to pass for reality itself, to be all of reality. It must be understood that the words of Breton put an end to all those little and great marvels that the books give us to admire in images or fables themselves marvelous, that is to say, on the day when we have grazed and sensed the extraordinary, we will no longer be in the presence of anything extraordinary, being in the presence only of the real world in its totality, which leaves us no landmark by which to distinguish what is the exception and what is the rule, what is consistent with and what is contrary to the law.

We can respond that that is a pure quarrel of words, that the reader to whom the remains of this experience are communicated, not living it himself, can only recognize it as exceeding his limits, as foreign to that which is known: the fantastic will reappear therefore, the bizarre regains its rights. It is an objection against which there is nothing to be said, except that the marvelous supposes a reader and an author themselves imaginary, and therefore far removed from the regions of our usual literary geography. And, in every case, that remains as a gauge of the great depths: the more a work will be strange, the more such strangeness will be uncomfortably grasping us, being everywhere and nowhere, the more it conceals itself,

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2 A surrealism that Andre Breton denounces in Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not: “Even Surrealism, after 20 years of existence, is prey to the evils that are the ransom of favor, of all notoriety. […] It is already far from being able to contain everything that is undertaken in its name, openly or not… Even the most outstanding men have to adapt themselves to dying not so much with a halo as with a long trail of dust.” [Blanchot’s note.]
avoids its appearance and, far from exposing itself, tends to go as unnoticed as possible in the eyes of others as in the eyes of its author.

In this the example of Kafka remains so singular. In a certain way, he wanted and he believed himself to be composing novels similar to those of Flaubert. Like Flaubert, guessing perhaps in himself the silent passion behind so many objective words, such as Dickens, in whom he admired the art of conveying the traits and appearance of people, he sought to reproduce external reality as accurately as possible. In his *Journal*, we see him himself constantly experimenting with descriptions of this genre, making little pictures that tend by all means to exactness. For such an effort to be true, to be Flaubert and Goethe, we know what it has resulted in: it resulted in Kafka. But, moreover, it may be remarked that, if *Amerika* — at least in Alexandre Vialatte’s rather negligent translation — seems to us the least accomplished of his novels, it’s in that work that the strangeness still hinders their author, that it is not within but often outside the fable, that he also feels, more than anywhere else, the need to justify it and to excuse it by resorting to certain fictions, for example, with the invention of a theater, which certainly authorizes, but also strikes at the artifice, all the strangeness. The other sign that the writer has not descended to such a profound level and that strangeness does not follow him as urgently as in *The Trial* and *The Castle*, is, first of all, in *Amerika*, neither life nor death are involved: at no time did the young Karl Rossmann encounter any difficulties, whether those of the capricious Clara, or the admonitions of the terrible great gate keeper, put him truly in jeopardy; but, above all, the strange is no longer that tunnel where, once entered, one can only advance, not only without hope of ever escaping from it, but having lost all recollection that there is nothing in the world but that world with no exit. In *Amerika*, we go in and out; it’s why the fantastic appears; it has the charm, and sometimes the good grace, of a caprice, but not the fatality of the irremediable.

The marvelous is not in any way repose. It’s again Breton who has warned us with a striking statement that, unhappily, all those who take delight in pleasure have hastened to neglect: “Dear imagi-
nation,” he says in the First Manifesto, “what I love most in you is that you do not forgive.” In his little book on the marvelous, Pierre Mabille “protested against the assimilation of the marvelous to allegory, to the fantastic, to cheap ghosts,” and, with the authority of a man who speaks of what he has seen, he has insisted on the character of the proof and tension that, in the imaginary, distinguishes truth from fact. “The marvelous expresses the need to surpass imposed limits, imposed by our structure, to attain a much greater beauty, a greater power, a greater pleasure, a greater duration. It wishes to surpass the limits of space, of time, it wants to destroy barriers, it is the struggle of liberty against everything that reduces, destroys, and mutilates it; it is tension, that is to say something different from regular and mechanical work: passionate and poetic tension. The marvelous takes advantage of the points of weakness of the organizing intelligence, as the fire of the volcano insinuates itself between the fault lines of rocks; it illuminates the attics of childhood; it is the strange lucidity of delirium; it is the light of the dream, the green lighting of passion; it flames above the masses at the hours of revolt. But the marvelous is still less the extreme tension of being than the conjunction of desire and of external reality. It is, at a precise moment, the disturbing moment when the world gives us its approval...”

This agreement, by which things give us more than they had the habit of giving to us, necessarily has its onerous side. It is not reassuring; it is disturbing; it does not gratify us, because it brings us more than our contentment; in this, it displeases us through that useless “too much” that opens the door to a world in which to justify itself completely is no longer possible. Grace itself, in the religious sense of the word, is probably only in the eyes of a Bremond abbot that amiability of the “dew” that he finds: for many others, it was “lightning” and torment, arid burning, sterile fertility, heavier than a pure and simple condemnation could have been. Likewise, the marvelous is “free,” but what is unjustified in it is also what makes it most necessary; seemingly a fantasy and a game, in truth the most profound experience of a man. That is why one more sign through which the marvelous in its authenticity announces itself seems to us to be this: it is unjustifiable, it has no rhyme or reason, and yet it re-

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responds to the most intimate and least gratuitous movement of a being that has felt it, and in that ordeal he has measured and sealed its condition, which can be expressed thus: the more imaginary a work will be, the further away it is from a graspable meaning, the more that work will have to be close to the vital experience of the person who wrote it.

It must be added that the author himself may be deceived. When Poe writes “Ligeia,” “Berenice,” and “Morella,” he probably does not know that it is a question of himself, that such tales, composed with the most conscious and sure art, an obsession which, by any means, seeks an outcome, solitude that secretly turns toward death to recognize the only face it has loved. But such “bizarre” fictions are for this reason the most real, and artifice is like the proof of truth, its trace which, like that of blood in Macbeth, remains ineffaceable under the glossy varnish that art seeks in vain to cover. It is that drop of blood which makes all the difference between Le cœur révélateur and certain fantastic fairy tales by Dickens, moreover very beautiful, like the Confessions Found in a Prison, where we are told the story of a man who kills to free himself from the possibility of killing, or a Criminal Trial, The Signaler, which describe the power of mysterious presentiments and irrational images.

Contrarily, in a work like one by Michaux, there is an alliance between an imagination that goes as far as possible to reach the pure imaginary, to the point of inventing a language, a world without reason, altogether devoid of meaning, and an infinitely active and lucid consciousness that finds in such gratuitousness the most immediate means to live, to cope with the test of every moment that is life in the world. Moreover, in the case of Michaux, as René Bertelé has clearly shown, these imaginary worlds, which he himself called Grande Garabagne, Countries of Magic, are not refuges, those territories of escape where life becomes again possible for those who do not dare to really live: rather, they represent platforms, stepping-stones from which words and images, precipitates of a fabulous height, acquire, through the speed of their fall and the strength of their momentum, a power of aggressiveness, an extreme effectiveness that renders them more dangerous and more useful than any other in that deadly

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struggle in which the writer is entirely engaged, here and nowhere else. Michaux alone proves that what is most gratuitous in the imagination is that which is most different from a game; it is out of such gratuitousness, out of such a plunge into an insignificant silent element that language draws a renewal of meaning and a superior power to make itself heard.

"Are words mere tokens," asks Pierre Mabille, "similar to currencies, which society has issued for the commodity of citizens, pure conveniences, human decrees that dictionaries preserve & consecrate, and do they only express men in their long history of struggles, or do they participate, in some way, in the object they designate? Do they have an obscure link with external reality? If they do not have this link, their currency is only a circulation of the great social body; if, contrarily, they participate in the essence of things, man has, through the word, a means of direct and magick action: What is then possible: incantation, bewitchment, prayer, the constraint of natural forces, exorcism." Almost to the same question, posed by a disciple of Heraclitus, here is what Socrates entreated him to be content with: "Eh! classmate, it is not a matter of which exam is easy, nor is it easy for a reasonable man, after having abandoned the care of himself and his soul to words, to reproach things for containing nothing of value; even better, to pretend that everything flows as if it were earthenware pitchers and, like people who suffer from rheumatism, to imagine that that is also the state of things, that everyone is prey to circulation and catarrh. Moreover, it is quite possible that this is so, but it is also possible that it is not so!"6

This response is remarkable, because it reveals to which paradox those who are most concerned with language are confronted: first, they rely on words of care to catch up with the essence of things, but at the same time they refuse to things all essence, all value. Socrates sees there an objection, but we can also see it as a necessary and meaningful contradiction, full of meaning, and the very movement of literature. Because literature, too, trusts words, as if words themselves were in some way participating in things; but, on the other hand, it must denounce them, it rejects such things, it tests them. It is

6 Blanchot gives no citation for this quote. It is perchance a paraphrase of a passage from Plato's Cratylus.
necessary, and this is why: if, in accordance with magick pretentions, we assure ourselves that our word has the power to act upon the world by animating it, at the same time we cede the right to this resuscitated world to escape, to flow into our hands, to surrender at every moment in question our action and our conquest, through the freedom that we are forced to recognize, from the moment when we attribute to ourselves the power to act upon it as upon a true consciousness. Any magickal interpretation of language by which we think of placing realities in the dependence of words which are the masters suppose also that we restore a part of our freedom to this very reality even, and this becomes all the more powerful as our means against it are much greater, and it becomes all the more subsumable as we attribute to it an essence of our own in relation to our words, for this essence can only be an image of the freedom that is ours and from which speech holds its power, so that all language, to act upon things, must first render things free, and, to participate in their essence, must make them like a conscious life that awakens and rejects all essence.

This is one of the reasons why language, as a magickal power, plays such a role in the marvelous, but a role that is no more restful, because, where it seems to have the most beautiful part, assuming all power through words and according to their meaning and out of their meanings, it also ceases to have the least right over this language that it is, from which it can no longer inherit, that it immerses itself again entirely in original freedom, and is no more than a pure and simple nothing. This, it will be said, is only hyperbole? But at least it shows that the liberty in words that is the Marvelous made language is not a liberty that the writer can take advantage of, because he cannot use it, cannot subjugate it and, contrarily, against it he has, at each moment, to safeguard his own, which, moreover, does not accept to be either suppressed or blinded. Out of such a struggle, Michel Leiris’ Aurora tells us of the vicissitudes, the alternatives, of successes and failures, of highs and lows, of which the infinite chain of metamorphoses is like a sickening substance. It is perceptible that with such a book the imaginary works in the intimacy of language; it is there that, triturating, knotting, and unraveling the secrets peculiar to the author, it renders them the most dangerous and the most
menacing, by delivering them to the rigor of free words, to that justice that “does not forgive.”

*Aurora*, in appearing a free work, is so close to its author that it seems, like the black cat of Edgar Poe, to have walled itself in by mistake, to have left an imprint of its foot. Who, having read *The Age of Man*, where the writer, in a frank autobiography, has given us all the details of his person and of his life, reads this purely imaginary fiction that *Aurora* is, is almost frightened to discover, at every moment, buried deep in the profound layers of language, well below the world and everyday life, the vestiges of his entirely fossilized figure, entirely evaporated and yet still present, obstinately manifest in its disappearance. Between *Maldoror* and *Aurora*, outside the play of echoes exchanged via the titles, reviewers have had every freedom to establish numerous comparisons. But what seems most striking to us is that the story of Leiris, in showing how the author has expressed himself and figured in it, suggests how Lautréamont is present in *Maldoror* and indicates to us how profoundly he must descend in order to find the contours of this invisible figure, in which a forever closed room remains, still alive, eyes open to us, the adolescent we have never seen.7

The marvelous is not necessarily the most grave, when the themes that it confronts most visibly affirm this gravity (for example, *Le beau ténébreux* [*The Dark Beauty*] seems to us more frivolous than *Le château d’Argol* [*The Castle of Argol*], where darkness speaks not and where language does not deliver its weapons in dialogues of cities of water). But, if the marvelous is often the most true when it is the most free, on the other hand, it is an absolute necessity from which nothing can free the writer except that which is free, he must pay for it one way or another. In the little book entitled *Liberté grande*, Julien Gracq speaks of “the beauty of this angel” which sanctified some of the “minor terrorists”: “That beauty which they preserve for us throughout the centuries, swimming around a garland of graceful heads cut like a balm of Egypt, the nickname of the Incorruptible... that superhuman chastity, that asceticism, that wild beauty of cut flowers which makes pale the faces of all women — it is, he says, the language of fire that for me, here and there, mysteriously

7 No photos of Lautréamont were known of at the time Blanchot wrote this essay. The first was discovered not until 30 years later, in 1977.
descends amid the silhouettes as rapid as the lightning of the great moving streets, as on the screen of an alley of burning trees in the countryside on a June night, and calls me to certain ecstatic panic the unforgettable face of some guillotines of birth.” By evoking, in his own tone, the images of Robespierre, Saint-Just, & Jacques Roux, by showing us these perfectly beautiful heads, “as if they were one day carried on the end of a pike, all the fascinating beauty of the night of man should have affected the magnetic faces of those Medusa heads,” perhaps Julien Gracq had also, secretly, evoked the true face of the Marvelous. Because the Marvelous has that beauty of a free head, freed from the laborious servitude of the body, erected, through the very justice that has struck it, far above the crowd of men, in a movement where condemnation is made apotheosis, to remind everyone, through the silence of a closed mouth and two closed eyes, that freedom is death, that all freedom must at a certain moment pass through death.

That is why this freedom of the head which is the Marvelous, a freedom that can be laughed at, since it depends on a pike that makes it appear (but thus so are all human works), would signify nothing but a reprehensible retraction, a low level sleight of hand, if it were not the freedom of a being who offered himself with a knife, the sovereign exaltation of a cut-off head. Hence, among all the works that appear and engage, with a happiness of which they are not ashamed, indulge in the free life of the imagination, have we the right to raise above all others, because they alone prophesy in the name of the fire that burned them, of the blood they cost, of the darkness they have called, the pages of Leonora Carrington that bear the title Down Below, and the work of Antonin Artaud. Of such texts, we shall say nothing. The story of Carrington evokes, with the utmost simplicity, the days she spent in a clinic in Santander and the existence that was hers when she crossed the bounds of common reason. The comparison of this account with Aurelia shows all its valor. As for the work of Artaud, he himself wrote: “I made my debut in literature by writing books to say that I could write nothing at all. My thought, when I had something to say or to write, was what denied me most. I never had ideas, and two very short books, each of 70 pages, revolve about this profound, inveterate, endemic absence of any idea. They are The Umbilicus of Limbo and Nerve Meter. At the
moment, they seemed to me full of cracks, faults, platitudes, and as if stuffed with spontaneous abortions, of renunciations and all kinds of abdications, always traveling side by side with what I meant to say of the essential and the enormous, and which I said I would never say, but after 20 years pass, they seem to me to be stupefying, not a success in respect to me, but through their contribution to the inexpressible. It’s thus that works age like wine and, though lying in relation to the writer, they themselves constitute a bizarre truth and that life, if it was itself authentic, ought never to have accepted. An inexpressible expression expressed through works that are only present debacles, and are only valid through the posthumous enlargement of a spirit dead with time and deadlocked in the present, do you want to tell me what it is? Since then I have written a few other works: Art and Death, Heliogabalus, The Theater and its Double, Journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras, New Revelations of Being, Letters from Rodez. In each one I was pursued by this sinister harlequinade of a well with stacks of texts superimposed on top of each other and which appear only on a single plane, like the grid of a secret quadrillage where the yes and the no, the black and the white, the true and the false, although contradictory in & of themselves, have liquefied into one man’s style, that of this poor Mr. Antonin Artaud.”

To such words, we do not see what it would be suitable to add, for they have the frankness of a knife, and they surpass in clairvoyance anything a writer has ever been able to write about himself, showing what a lucid mind it is which, to become free, has undergone the test of the Marvelous.

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PHILOSOPHY OF THE FALLEN:
On Kafka's Savages

Photograph: Ghazal Zamani, Last Night Fallen (2019)

Jason Mohaghegh
Those savages of whom it is recounted that they have no other longing than to die, or rather, they no longer have even that longing, but death has a longing for them, and they abandon themselves to it, or rather, they do not even abandon themselves, but fall into the sand on the shore and never get up again—those savages I much resemble, and indeed I have fellow clansmen round about, but the confusion in these territories is so great, the tumult is like waves rising and falling by day and by night, and the brothers let themselves be borne upon it. — Franz Kafka, "The Savages"

Three footsteps into an abyss and already we encounter three different terminologies for the same group: the savages, the clansmen, and the brothers. Does this triumvirate of names represent a gradual transfiguration or sequence of ritual phases? Do these pseudonyms imply that they walk along three vital axes or descend across three deadly staircases? Should we worry that this sliding scale from formality to intimacy—savage, clansman, brother—will somehow heighten the risk of our trespass into this realm of the doomed shoreline and make all thoughts of return/reversal impossible?

No doubt, it seems that we are confronting nothing less than a secret society of the abyss, which necessarily places us in the logic of exclusion, ambush, and covert war. But who are these strange practitioners of the surrender (falling to the sands), and what obscure logic of semblance and resemblance binds them together as they wash away beneath the tidal foam? The narrator begins from a voice of almost anthropological distance and neutrality, using the classical designation of "savage" to describe an unformed world-view presumably in opposition to the complex thought-formations of the passage itself.¹ Moreover, the intricate depiction of their gesture

¹ The chosen term here is misleading in that it is typically "the barbarian" (not "the savage") who by definition constitutes the enemy of civilization. The savage generally exists in non-relation to the rising cities, of which they remain unaware, whereas the barbarian harbors a clear vendetta: they look to storm the high gates and burn all palaces as some terrorizing negation of the emergent epoch. To this end, Kafka does extend an accursed quality to his legion—later in the same piece he writes that they are "dreaded as though they were the Devil"—yet this is simply an inadvertent mood that emanates from their self-enveloped practice. They do not actually ride against the walls of the real but rather evacuate their own survival-instinct (a first primal criterion), offering no resistance to lethal capture by the undertow. They fight nothing, not even the nothing itself, and still somehow embody an awful severity. Does this speak to another ancestral destiny, then, based neither in the savage's oblivion nor the barbarian's hatred? What should we call this will to slowest immersion—itself an amalgam of extreme fatalism, endurance, and vulnerability? Have they
cannot help but stutter and turn on itself ("or rather, or rather"), at first simulating a nervous series of clarifications that we later learn might actually be the sound of a trap’s many bolts locking around us. There is no anxiety here: they have played this game before; they know exactly what they are doing.

The second classification—"clansmen"—only further maintains this circle’s anonymity while also signaling an alliance that follows the predatory or hunting paradigms of early tribes. The abyss is therefore precisely where we meet the radical foreigners or cutthroats with zero loyalty to our ways; our despair brings no mercy, as we find ourselves chased by those whose apparent coldness is its own delirium (that has nothing to do with us). Let us note the absolute calmness in this realization that their dream is our nightmare.

But the third honorary title, above all others, is the stuff of bad omens. “The brothers,” he whispers in a way that chills any reader’s spine, for it means that they have forged some other continuity down there in the chasm, one for which salt water functions in the place of bloodlines and generational inheritances are inscribed on pitch-black waves. There is no indication that they are sacrificial offerings, for if anything their silent bodies serve as anti-messianic warnings. It is conceivable that they have lived for eternities in this half-space of darkness, and it is also conceivable that the technique of increasing proximity to the ocean’s border—becoming brothers precisely at the moment they cast into its rolling depths—tells us the perspective of the actual narrator behind this fragment (what unites the liquid, the horizon, and the bottom).

There are only three contingents that would experience closeness to those abandoned rhythmically to the “rising and falling by day and by night”: the drowned, the lost-at-sea, or the sea itself. Thus, we are compelled to wonder whether we are being stalked/enveloped by ghosts (those with unfinished business among the living), deserters/runaways (those who have mastered the art of disappearance), or by the patron god of this island nowhere itself (that oceanic consciousness which houses the malice, void, and restlessness of the sunken).

studied the logic of the whirlpool itself, manifest in this exceptional vigilance, this long-gone subject that conveys itself to the drift if only to threaten the collapse of worlds?
Cominciò che era finita, di cui lei è autrice e che uscirà a settembre, sarà la terza biografia pubblicata su Carmelo Bene, insieme a Vita di Carmelo Bene (1998) di Giancarlo Dotto e Sono apparso alla Madonnna (1982) di Bene stesso. Potrebbe dirci se questa sua opera prende in
esame l’intera vita di Bene o se riguarda in particolare gli anni che lei ha trascorso con lui?

Devo correggere la sua domanda, Sono apparso alla Madonna e Vita di Carmelo Bene, le due autobiografie di Carmelo Bene, sono state scritte entrambe insieme a Giancarlo Dotto. Sono apparso alla Madonna, pubblicato da Longanesi nel 1982, anche se in copertina evidenziava solo il nome di Carmelo Bene, nelle pagine interne subito dopo il titolo in carattere minore e corsivo era scritto “I brani in corsivo sono testimonianze di Giancarlo Dotto.” Avevano lavorato alla stesura del libro registrando delle conversazioni che poi venivano trascritte; la stessa procedura usata per Vita di Carmelo Bene.

Cominciò che era finita che uscirà in autunno per Edizioni dell’Asino (direzione editoriale di Goffredo Fofi) non la definirei una biografia: è il racconto della nostra relazione e collaborazione, del lavoro fatto e dei progetti a venire. Nato per esigenze pratiche, memoria difensive per i tribunali civili e penali, nel tempo il testo ha trovato una forma concreta, cercando di svelare a me stessa i meccanismi della nostra relazione e quindi anche del lavoro che insieme abbiamo fatto per lunghi anni. Credo, o almeno ho cercato, di trovare qualche chiave in più. E per raccontare di noi, ho avuto in alcuni passaggi la necessità di recuperare memorie più lontane.

Lei a incontrato Bene nel 1994, quando collaborò come costumista all’allestimento di Hamlet suite. Che cosa ricorda di quell’incontro e quale fu la vostra relazione da allora in poi?

Era il 1994 e Carmelo stava preparando il debutto di Hamlet suite per il Festival Shakespeariano di Verona previsto per la fine di luglio, e aveva bisogno di una costumista. Il 27 giugno, erano circa le due del pomeriggio, incontrai per la prima volta Carmelo Bene. Non aveva un ufficio, scriveva e lavorava a casa al montaggio dei suoi spettacoli. Il colloquio durò poco più di un’ora. Mi ricevette nel tinello, la stanza attaccata alla cucina, dove lui era solito lavorare. Parlava solo lui, io prendevo appunti e annuivo. Era simpatico e di buon umore. Quel modo di parlare veloce però trasmetteva una certa ansia a chi gli stava intorno. Aveva tanti progetti e tante incertezze. Tornava al teatro dopo circa quattro anni, l’ultimo spettacolo che aveva fatto era
Pentesilea al Teatro Olimpico nel 1990. Da allora in poi la sua vita era cambiata. Sopraffatto dagli eventi, sono gli anni che in Vita di Carmelo Bene chiamà “La Rovina,” la sua carriera aveva subito un fermo in seguito a gravi problemi legati di salute. A metà del 1994 guarito, decide di riprendere in mano la sua vita, il teatro. In questo clima nasce il progetto Hamlet suite. Il desiderio feroce di riaffermare la propria voce, e la paura di non riuscirci. Per fare smuovere l’attenzione pubblica aveva chiesto a Maurizio Costanzo uno spazio nel suo show Uno contro tutti. Il giorno del nostro primo colloquio è anche il giorno della registrazione televisiva del Costanzo Show. Prima di andare via, erano circa le 15,30, mi chiese di dargli una mano a vestirsi per l’occasione. Mi spiegò che doveva confrontarsi con il pubblico e alcuni ospiti del Teatro Parioli, persone selezionate dallo staff di Maurizio Costanzo: una sorta di match all’ultima parola. La trasmissione come previsto ebbe un notevole successo registrando una media di ascoltatori eccezionale, quanto serviva a rimettere in gioco il nome di Carmelo Bene. Il giorno dopo arrivaron all’organizzatore di Carmelo decine di richieste di scritture tante da assicurare la tournée dei due anni successivi. Era stato certo un evento mediatico eccezionale nato da necessità pratiche, in cui Carmelo utilizza la pressione accumulata nel suo forzato isolamento degli anni rovinati per far sentire la sua voce. E credo che al di là delle battute e dei luoghi comuni che ormai si raccolgono intorno alla figura di Carmelo nascosto in bella mostra in quel sorriso beffardo che sfoggia sul palco di Costanzo c’è tutto il dolore di ritrovarsi ancora una volta punto e a capo.

La nostra relazione nasce poco dopo il debutto di Verona, ci abbiamo messo del tempo per individuarci. In Vita Carmelo racconta delle sue abitudini nel rapportarsi alle donne che lo avevano accompagnato per un certo periodo della sua vita, relazioni che spesso prevedevano contratti di ingaggio remunerati alla maniera di Masch, contratti sempre disattesi dalle donne che li avevano sottoscritti, diventando spesso problemi da sciogliere nei tribunali. Per concludere il discorso e arrivare alla nostra relazione, aggiunge che il colpo definitivo potrebbe arrivargli ora che al suo fianco “c’è qualcuno che dice di volerti bene.”

Teca dedicata agli studi per le traduzioni di ”In-vulnerabilità d’Achille, Impossibile suite tra Ilio e Sciro,” Teatro Argentina 24 novembre 2000.

Lei ha avuto un ruolo apprezzabile nell’aiutare Bene, durante gli ultimi anni della sua vita, a riordinare i molti scritti che aveva prodotto. Potrebbe parlarci di questa esperienza?

Tutto è nato quasi subito, insieme alla nostra relazione, il successo e risonanza di Uno contro tutti erano arrivati all’editor di Bompiani, che ebbe l’idea di proporre a Carmelo la pubblicazione dei suoi scritti all’interno della collana Opere in cui erano inseriti i più illustri letterati del mondo. Una proposta alla quale non si poteva rinunciare, vista la prestigiosa collocazione. E di conseguenza uno dei miei primi incarichi extra teatrali fu quello di seguirlo nella complicata selezione dei testi, e la trascrizione per la casa editrice dei capitoli introduttivi alle opere. Un lavoro redazionale che portai avanti negli anni successivi per tutti i libri che furono pubblicati. Carmelo scriveva rigorosamente a mano, su quaderni. Io trascrivevo, correggevamo
le bozze insieme. Alcune volte, come per ‘l mal de’ fiori ho impaginato il testo e progettato le copertine.

Lei ha gestito per parecchi anni la fondazione “L’Immemoriale di Carmelo Bene” a Roma. Potrebbe descrivere lo scopo e la funzione di questa fondazione purtroppo non più in attività?

La fondazione testamentaria di Carmelo era la naturale conclusione di un progetto più ampio che aveva portato avanti in oltre quaranta anni di attività. Il progetto fondante era la visione e la conseguente destinazione dell’opera e dei beni che insieme dovevano costituire il lascito di Carmelo Bene destinati ad una gestione e fruizione pubblica. Mi spiego meglio: la sede della fondazione doveva essere la sua residenza a Otranto; la casa era stata acquistata proprio nell’intento di costituire al suo interno la sede della fondazione, uno spazio destinato a custodire e promuovere la sua opera, costituita dal suo archivio, la vasta biblioteca e nastroteca, a disposizione di studiosi e ricercatori. Un centro di formazione per i giovani sostenuto da un consiglio di amministrazione di cui facevano parte la Regione Puglia, la Provincia di Lecce e il Comune di Otranto. Enti che ben presto, visto l’agguerrito attacco delle eredi estromesse che impugnarono il testamento, si ritirarono dal programma, promuovendone la liquidazione. In poche parole abbandonarono la nave. Del programma di Carmelo non rimane nulla. Dal 2005 tutto il lascito e la sede della fondazione è caduto sotto la gestione delle eredi. L’immobile è una residenza privata e il fondo da pochi mesi è stato acquisito con un contratto economico in comodato d’uso dalla Regione Puglia per dieci anni. L’augurio, per tutti i contribuenti che pagano le tasse, è che nei prossimi dieci anni la Regione Puglia riesca quantomeno a digitalizzare e rendere fruibile quel materiale, che nel testamento Carmelo Bene gli aveva assegnato a titolo gratuito. La politica in questi casi si muove seguendo linee misteriose.

Saprebbe dirci se esistono dei testi non ancora pubblicati, per esempio lettere indirizzate ad amici e conoscenti, oppure delle opere teatrali o dei film che Bene aveva in mente di realizzare e che non fu in grado di portare a termine a causa delle sue condizioni di salute o per altri motivi?
Per tutelare gli interessi di tutti, ma soprattutto per tenere insieme nel tempo l'archivio (scritti, libri e registrazioni) ed evitarne la dispersione e il frazionamento, il primo febbraio del 2005 la Soprintendenza archivistica del Lazio dichiarò il fondo di Carmelo Bene patrimonio di interesse storico sottoponendolo a vincolo ministeriale. Per il Ministero avevamo depositato una lista di otto pagine che identificava i beni: 1500 volumi con le note autografe (di cui circa 540 con note ai margini e circa 1000 autografi), oltre mille fotografie, 700 nastri revox con le registrazioni delle colonne sonore e degli spettacoli live, 50 tra agende e quaderni, e numerose cartelline con progetti.

Per completare queste liste avevamo redatto inventari molto accurati delle opere e la catalogazione della vasta biblioteca di Roma, che comprendeva poco più di 6000 libri.

Esistono numerosi scritti di progetti mai realizzati, le cinquanta agende custodite nel fondo raccolgono idee che spesso non hanno avuto la fortuna di essere portate alla luce.

Le lettere furono archiviate così come le conservava Carmelo, in una scatola di polistirolo; non erano molte, forse una decina. Non le ricordo tutte; ne ricordo una perché l’avevo recuperata e inserita tra le altre: era la risposta di Laurence Olivier, un biglietto scritto a macchina e firmato. All’invio da parte di Carmelo dei testi delle sue opere teatrali, Olivier aveva dato una risposta negativa che Carmelo non si era preso la briga di conservare.

Sicuramente tra le opere inedite resta l’ultimo lavoro letterario Leggenda, che nasce sulla scia della scrittura del poema ’l mal de’ fiori. In quel periodo progettava di riportare in scena lo spettacolo che poi ebbe il nome di In-vulnerabilità d’Achille. In questa ricostruzione era partito, o meglio aveva creduto di trovare la conferma che miss (signorina) e missing (mancante) avessero una radice comune (riagganciandosi così alla memoria lacaniana sulla mancanza della donna...). Sul tema di Pentesilea concepisce questo nuovo poema. Aveva lavorato a lungo negli anni precedenti ed evidenziato tramite l’uso del manichino il gioco dei ruoli: Pentesilea si anima, solo quando Achille le parla, la parola che dà vita. Il poema era stato poi ridotto in versione spettacolo perché doveva essere il testo da portare in scena dopo In-vulnerabilità.

Potrebbe dirci quali libri e quali film interessavano Bene durante l’ultimo periodo della sua vita?

Negli ultimi anni leggeva saggi di filosofia, aveva letto tanto negli anni precedenti. Leggeva e rileggeva gli stessi libri, aggiungendo chiuse sui margini di alcuni testi. Aveva scoperto e letto con interesse Carlo Sini. Sicuramente non era disposto a leggere né romanzi e nemmeno poeti viventi. Alcuni amici scrittori a lui cari gli mandavano i libri freschi di stampa, di cui leggeva solo la dedica, senza aprirli per non compromettere la loro amicizia. Era irremovibile. Per fare qualche nome tra i suoi contemporanei riconosceva Landolfi, Pizzuto, Brancati e Gadda, mai una donna: nessuna era all’altezza di Emily Brontë.

Il cinema lo conquistava in rare occasioni. Quello italiano contemporaneo lo definiva “due camere e cucina.” Fatta eccezione per il duo Ciprì e Maresco e per Joao César Monteiro.

Come descriverebbe il rapporto di Carmelo Bene con la musica? Condizionavate la passione per l’opera lirica? Quali brani ascoltavate/ascoltavate più frequentemente?

Il suo legame con la musica era profondo e lo aveva coltivato per tutta la vita. Non aveva avuto una formazione musicale vera e propria. Non sapeva leggere uno spartito, ma era dotato di un formidabile orecchio e di una volontà d’acciaio, grazie alle quali aveva educato la propria voce seguendo quella direzione: la musicalità. L’opera era stata la sua prima passione, impressa nella sua memoria era Traviata diretta da Toscanini con l’orchestra e il coro della NBC del 1946, che per lui era l’unica lettura possibile di quell’opera. I tempi musicali accelerati creano una serie di difficoltà ogni volta superate dalle virtù eccezionali degli esecutori. In alcuni passaggi il dramma diventa quasi comico, come nel finale che invece di essere calante, diventa impetuoso e violento. Licia Albanese che interpreta Violetta incalzata da Toscanini a rivedere i tempi musicali si era recata a visitare le donne malate di tubercolosi, per constatarne i sintomi isterici dai quali erano dominate. Nella registrazione c’è un breve passaggio, pochi minuti, da cui Carmelo aveva appreso una grande lezione, ed è la lettera, scena che avviene nel finale. Nella tradizione operistica viene eseguita in voce, quasi mai interpretata. Licia Albanese la ese-
gue in un musicale parlato d’opera, a cui vale la pena prestare attenzione. La Albanese come lui era di origine pugliese e conservava una dizione delle vocali aperte che lo divertivano molto. Amava in maniera particolare Maria Callas e Kathleen Ferrier, Giuseppe di Stefano e Tito Schipa, cantanti che in qualche modo avevano superato i propri limiti naturali, e su quelli avevano costruito l’eccezione.

Abbiamo ascoltato insieme Rigoletto e Macbeth di Verdi per questioni di lavoro, ma anche il Don Giovanni di Mozart con la direzione di Josef Krips, Lucia di Lammermoor alternando l’ascolto della Sutherland e Callas, Rossini in tutte le sue composizioni, i Kindertotenlieder di Mahler nell’esecuzione di Bruno Walter. Non amava Puccini, ma diceva che “il valzer di Musetta” era il più bel valzer mai scritto. Per non parlare delle collaborazioni con compositori e musiciani per le produzioni dei suoi spettacoli, con partecipazioni straordinarie, per esempio nel 1962 per la seconda edizione di Spettacolo-concerto Majakowskij la poetessa Amelia Rosselli eseguiva le musiche dal vivo. Nel corso degli anni aveva collaborato con Bussotti, Zito, Ferrero, Luporini, Lenti, Gelmetti, Romitelli, Bellugi, Panni, Sciarrino, e tanti altri.

Cosa pensa a proposito dell’utilizzo dell’amplificazione nel teatro di Bene? E della produzione cinematografica? Bene mirava, come da lui stesso più volte sottolineato, alla distruzione dell’immagine: secondo lei, il cinema ha informato in qualche modo i suoi lavori teatrali successivi?

Credo che sia stata l’unica logica conseguenza della sua ricerca teatrale. La seconda prova d’attore che Carmelo affronta dopo il debutto con il Caligola di Camus è una prova da solista, lo Spettacolo-concerto Majakowski con le musiche dal vivo di Sylvano Bussotti, dove per necessità inizia ad avvicinarsi a strumenti che gli permettevano di utilizzare una gamma vocale maggiore. Un attore di prosa della fine degli anni cinquanta veniva educato a impostare la voce per arrivare all’ultima fila, cosa che riduceva la fascia timbrica alle sole note alte. Negli anni le sue collaborazioni con i musicisti diventarono un punto fisso di tutti gli allestimenti sia per i recital che gli spettacoli corali. Nel ’66 per Il rosa e il nero alle elaborazioni musicali di Vittorio Gelmetti e le canzoni di Silvano Spaccino aggiunge un nuovo strumento:
il Sinket di Paul Ketoff. Utilizza così nel corso degli anni tutti gli strumenti che favoriscono la sua ricerca teatrale.

L'esperienza cinematografica, le tecniche che aveva appreso nel fare cinema, le applica alle opere che porterà in scena dopo il 1972: una scena doppiata in fase di montaggio si trasforma a teatro in play-back. Ma non sono escamotage tecnici: tutti sono capaci a riprendere una scena in presa diretta, o a lasciare all'attore in scena la libertà d'espressione. Utilizza la strumentazione fonica e il play-back per evitare l'equivoco dell'interpretazione. Il senso e il significato di questo esercizio si possono capire solo se si considera il percorso artistico di Carmelo Bene nel suo insieme.

Il teatro, il cinema, la letteratura, la poesia di Carmelo Bene rappresentano un corpo unico: ha dedicato quaranta anni della sua esistenza alla “demolizione” dei concetti estetici e etici precostituiti, dei significati catartici, dell’impegno sociale manifesto. Come chiarisco nel mio libro, spiegando il senso e l’origine del titolo che ho scelto (Cominciò che era finita), metafora della vita per la vita.


Teca con i libri studiati intorno al tema di Amleto, appunti di scenografia per la messa in scena del film per la Rai Amleto 1978.
Nella sua autobiografia, Bene fa notare di cucinare spesso in scena: secondo lei, quale ruolo avevano questi exploits culinari nei suoi lavori teatrali e cinematografici? Quali erano i suoi piatti preferiti?

A teatro la scelta di utilizzare il convivio come luogo dove avveniva l’azione scenica è stata la diretta conseguenza dettata dalla necessità di uscire fuori dalla finzione teatrale. All’inizio degli anni ’60 Carmelo insieme ad un gruppo di fedeli collaborati fonda il Teatro Laboratorio, uno spazio adattato a teatro con pochi posti e una pedana che serviva da palcoscenico. Come lui stesso racconta, tra i pochi arredi c’era un tavolaccio intorno al quale la compagnia si riuniva bivaccando. Parte della compagnia era Manlio Nevastri, addetto anche alla cucina. Questa “situazione” veniva adottata spesso in scena. Momenti dove l’azione si svolge intorno all’argomento culinario ricorrono spesso, solo per citarne qualcuno: In Nostra Signora dei turchi, nel S.A.D.E, in Don Giovanni, Capricci.

Nella vita privata Carmelo aveva abituato il suo corpo ai suoi ritmi circadiani sostituendo il giorno con la notte: il teatro lo esige. In questa organizzazione per tutta la vita ha consumato un solo pasto, quello serale che molto spesso diventava notturno. Si svegliava solitamente dopo le 12, prendeva un caffè, e tirava avanti fino a sera.


A Otranto aveva fatto costruire nel tinello lungo tutta una parete un camino, un barbecue e un forno. In quel camino abbiamo cucinato spesso il pescecani di Pinocchio, per dire pesci dalle misure spropositate, che avevano bisogno di ore per la cottura. Il pesce spada cucinato alla maniera di Carmelo: bisognava aspettare che il suo refe-
rente pescatore recuperasse un pesce dalle dimensioni straordinarie, cioè che il diametro del povero pesce superasse i cinquanta centimetri, dal quale bisognava ricavare una unica fetta dalla parte centrale alta tra i dodici e i quindici centimetri. Ottenuta la materia prima, bisognava procedere per la preparazione: nelle prime ore del pomeriggio veniva avviato il fuoco alimentato esclusivamente con ceppi di legno d’ulivo. La quantità era determinata dall’esigenza di ottenere una brace che doveva durare più ore. Verso sera quando l’incendio era stato domato e la legna si era tramutata in una bava rossa, veniva posizionata la griglia con la fetta gigante di pesce spada. Andava cotto un’ora per lato. All’esterno diventava nero; i primi centimetri di carne venivano completamente carbonizzati. Ultimata la cottura, il corteo funebre deponeva i poveri resti sul tagliere in cucina. Con alcuni coltelli sottili e lunghi veniva tagliata via la parte carbonizzata, e recuperato il cuore della fetta, che si era cotto conservando l’umidità giusta e un sapore straordinario. Il pesce veniva servito al naturale. La sua cucina era molto gustosa, ma dopo qualche tempo passò la mansione a me, riconoscendo le mie capacità culinarie.

_Cosa pensa della caratterizzazione di Bene (che alcuni suoi conoscenti e detrattori condividono) come narcisista, misogino e misantropo? Erano certi suoi atteggiamenti da provocateur soltanto una maschera pubblica che non corrispondeva in realtà al suo carattere?_

Aveva tanto avversato gli stereotipi da averne creato suo malgrado uno tutto suo: il cibiismo. Di maschera ne aveva una sola, che manteneva saldamente al suo posto sia in privato che in pubblico. Non concependo in alcun modo una separazione tra i due spazi, potremmo dire che viveva come se fosse sempre in pubblico o sempre in privato. A narcisista, misogino e misantropo aggiugnerei megalomane. A sostenere la propria causa aveva assunto dai pensieri leopardiani il XXIV:

_O io m’inganno, o rara è nel nostro secolo quella persona lodata generalmente, le cui lodi non sieno cominciate dalla sua propria bocca. Tanto è l’egoismo, e tanta l’invidia e l’odio che gli uomini portano gli uni agli altri, che_
volendo acquistar nome, non basta far cose lodevoli, ma
bisogna lodarle, o trovare, che torna lo stesso, alcuno che
in tua vece le predichi e le magnifichi di continuo,
intonandole con gran voce negli orecchi del pubblico, per cos-
tringere le persone si mediante l’esempio, e si coll’ardire e
colla perseveranza, a ripetere parte di quelle
lodi. Spontaneamente non isperare che facciano motto, per
grandezza di valore che tu dimostri, per bellezza d’opere
che tu facci. Mirano e tacciono eternamente; e, potendo,
impediscono che altri non vegga. Chi vuole innalzarsi,
quantunque per virtù vera, dia bando alla modestia.
Ancora in questa parte il mondo è simile alle donne: con
verecondia e con riserbo da lui non si ottiene nulla.

La misoginia faceva parte del bagaglio: il suo rapporto con le donne
probabilmente nasce proprio in seno alla sua famiglia d’origine, or-
ganizzata secondo le regole del matriarcato. Con la famiglia, ma con
la madre in particolare, si consuma un’opposizione che va avanti tut-
ta la vita, tanto da impedirgli di presenziare ai funerali di entrambi i
genitori. E non è stata una rappresaglia dell’eccentrico personaggio,
ma una conseguenza determinata da accadimenti accumulati nel
corso degli anni. In una trasmissione televisiva Carmelo si era pro-
nunciato più volte contrario al concetto di famiglia; diciamo che lui
non era stato particolarmente fortunato, e a quella d’origine si ag-
giunge all’ultimo, ma per questo non ultima, “la famiglia” residua.Se-
condo Carmelo, Narciso si suicida perché quello che vede gli fa or-
rore: si potrebbe partire da qui per argomentare sul tema, e proba-
bilmente dovremmo convenire che è solo la punta dell’iceberg chia-
mato Carmelo Bene.

_Cosa può dirci a proposito delle cause sociali sostenute da Bene, in par-
ticolare riguardo al suo rapporto con Eduardo De Filippo e l’istituto
Filangieri (che De Filippo promosse verso la metà degli anni 80)?_

Ho letto che Carmelo e Eduardo De Filippo avevano devoluto
l’incasso di alcuni recital negli anni ottanta. Ma personalmente di
quegli eventi non so di più. De Filippo ha portato avanti per anni il
suo progetto per il recupero dei giovani del carcere minorile di Nisi-

In una delle sue ‘lettere del veggente’, Rimbaud afferma che il principale ruolo del poeta deve essere quello di trasformarsi in veggente e raggiungere l’ignoto. Non importa se, nel fare questo, il poeta finisca per perdere l’intelligenza delle sue visioni, perché altri verranno dopo di lui che ne riprenderanno il cammino. Quali furono secondo lei le visioni di Bene e quali i suoi contributi più importanti nel campo del teatro, del cinema e della letteratura? Legata alla precedente domanda: c’è qualcuno secondo lei, nel panorama italiano o internazionale, che ha ripreso il cammino iniziato da Bene? C’è al giorno d’oggi un artista (maestro) di comparabile statura?

La sua veggenza lo aveva spinto a non aderire al furore politico dei suoi contemporanei. Alla fine degli anni sessanta scrive almeno due sceneggiature intorno al soggetto di Pinocchio: il film non trovò finanziatori e rimase insieme a tanti altri un progetto incompiuto. Nel finale di Pinocchio 70 il protagonista responsabile e rassegnato si unisce alla folla del corteo del Primo Maggio, che festeggia la propria schiavitù. Un sogno finito prima ancora di cominciare.

L’adattamento di questo Pinocchio si pone in completa antitesi con quanto si produceva all’epoca nel cinema. Avendo ben chiari oggi i movimenti politici di quegli anni, le battaglie della classe operaia, il terrorismo, l’ostracismo della Democrazia cristiana, questo Pinocchio era impossibile da realizzare: sarebbe stato una spina nel fianco di chiunque l’avesse finanziato. Nessun ministero, nessun partito ci avrebbe messo una lira. Qui la classe operaia non va in paradiso, ma si avvia verso il precipizio dei giorni nostri.


La premonizione di un destino già segnato è anche nelle pagine di Nostra Signora dei Turchi — le pagine dedicate ai preparativi degli
autoctoni per l’arrivo dei nuovi Turchi, i turisti. Cinquant’anni prima aveva descritto con dovizia di particolari il destino di quella terra.

Goffredo Fofi descrive in una intervista televisiva la differenza nell’essere lo spettatore di uno spettacolo teatrale di Carmelo e del Living Theatre: la spinta creativa della ricerca del Living Theatre è incentrata sul completo coinvolgimento del pubblico, un lavoro corale che funziona quando le due parti sono completamente fuse; mentre Carmelo scava un solco intorno allo spettatore, lo isola dal resto dei presenti, lo obbliga a fare i conti con sé stesso.

Il teatro senza spettacolo e La ricerca impossibile non sono solo due titoli, sono soprattutto due assunti, due premesse alla comprensione dell’opera di Carmelo, ammesso che ci sia qualcosa da capire, direbbe lui.

Il teatro, la letteratura, ma direi tutte le arti performative degli ultimi anni in Italia, seguono i gusti del pubblico, il massimo della ricerca è indirizzato verso l’impegno sociale: immigrati, carcerati, abusati; e alle riproposte dei classici in versione integrale con l’intento formativo, indirizzato alle comitive scolastiche. E in nome dell’impegno che non demorde gli artisti devono essere brave persone e esempi per le prossime generazioni.


La fine del novecento si è trascinata dietro tutti i conflitti intellettuali, ideologie comprese, lasciando questa conca vuota, questo spazio bianco, al quale prima o poi qualcuno comincerà a dare un nome. Noi non vediamo l’ora.
Your biography on Carmelo Bene, Cominciò che era finita, will be coming out in September of this year. It will be the third published biography on Bene, including Giancarlo Dotto’s Vita di Carmelo Bene (1998), and Bene’s own autobiography, Sono apparso alla Madonna (1982). Is your biography of Bene an examination of his entire life and work, or do you focus in particular on the years you knew him?

First of all, your question needs some clarification. Sono apparso alla Madonna and Vita di Carmelo Bene were both co-written by Carmelo Bene and Giancarlo Dotto. Sono apparso alla Madonna was first published by Longanesi in 1982.\(^1\) While only Bene’s name appears on the cover, in the initial pages — in lower-case italics just after the book’s title, we find written “The sections in italics are Giancarlo Dotto’s.” They put the book together by tape-recording their conversations and then transcribing them; the same process was used for Vita di Carmelo Bene.

My book, Cominciò che era finita, which is coming out this fall with Edizioni dell’Asino (under the editorial direction of Goffredo Fofi), is not truly a biography in my opinion; it is rather the story of our personal relationship and of the work we did together as well as the projects we hoped to accomplish.

The book was born from practical exigencies — a defendant’s notes for both civil and criminal court cases — but then, over time, it became something more concrete, as I attempted to understand the mechanisms at play in our relationship, and, therefore, also in the work we did together over the course of long years. I believe to have found, or, at the very least, tried to find some answers. In order to tell our story, in certain passages, I had to look back on more distant memories.

You met Bene in 1994, when you collaborated with him on the costume design of Hamlet Suite. What do you recall about that initial meeting, and how did your personal and professional relationship evolve?

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\(^1\) While the first edition was co-written, Sono apparso alla Madonna was edited and republished with only Carmelo Bene’s autobiographical text for his collected works (Opere, Bompiani: 1995).
It was 1994. Carmelo was preparing the debut of his *Hamlet Suite* for Verona’s Shakespeare Festival at the end of July, and he was looking for a costume designer.

The first time I met Carmelo was on June 27th, at around two o’clock in the afternoon. He didn’t have an office; he worked from home, where he wrote and worked on his plays. The interview lasted a little over an hour. We met in the dinette — the room next to the kitchen — where he usually worked. He talked while I took notes and nodded my head. He was friendly and in good spirits. But that way of his of talking fast elicited a certain form of anxiety in those around him. He had a lot of projects and a lot of incertitudes.

He was returning to the theater after a nearly four-year hiatus. The last play he had staged was *Penthesilea* at the Teatro Olimpico in 1990. After that, his life changed. Overwhelmed by events, these were the years that he would call in *Vita di Carmelo Bene* “La Rovina,” or the ruinous years. His career was suddenly at a standstill due to serious health problems. When his health had improved by mid-1994, he decided to take control of his life and return to the theater. *Hamlet Suite* was born in this atmosphere, with the fierce desire to reaffirm his voice, and the fear of not succeeding. To arouse public attention, he had asked Maurizio Costanzo for a spot on his show, *Uno Contro Tutti*.

The day of our first interview also happened to be the day he performed on the Costanzo Show. It was around half past three, and I was about to leave, when he asked me if I would help him with selecting his attire for the show. He explained that he would be going up against the audience, as well as certain guests from the Teatro Parioli, people who had been selected by Maurizio Costanzo’s staff. It was meant to be a battle for the last word.

As expected, the program was a considerable success, with exceptionally high ratings that effectively restored Carmelo Bene’s name to the limelight. The following day, Carmelo’s agent received dozens of requests for scripts, enough to keep him busy for the next two years. It was beyond a doubt an exceptional media event that was born from a practical necessity to make his voice heard. To do so, Carmelo put to use the accumulated pressure from his forced isolation in his ruinous years. I think that beyond the jokes and clichés surrounding the figure of Carmelo, who was showing off on Cos-
tanzo’s stage and hiding behind that derisive smile of his, is all the heartache of finding himself back at square one.

Our relationship began shortly after the debut in Verona; it took some time for us to get to know each other. In Vita di Carmelo Bene, Carmelo talks about the ways he had dealt with the women who had accompanied him throughout certain periods of his life — relationships that often involved employment contracts remunerated in the manner of Masoch, and contracts broken by the women who had signed them, and therefore that often ended up in court. Getting to our relationship: at the end of that section on women, he adds that he could receive the final blow now that there is someone by his side "who says 'I love you.'”
Everything happened almost immediately, alongside our relationship. The success and popularity of Uno Contro Tutti had reached the editor of Bompiani, who proposed the idea of publishing Carmelo's writings in their series titled Opere, or collected works, where the most illustrious intellectuals in the world were included. It was a proposal he simply couldn't refuse given the prestigious catalogue. Consequently, one of my first tasks outside of the theater was to help him with the complicated selection of the texts and to transcribe the introductory chapters for the publishing house. It was editorial work that I kept on doing in the years that followed for all his published books. Carmelo wrote rigorously by hand in notebooks, while I transcribed, and we corrected the drafts together. A few times, I also paginated the text and designed the cover, like I did for 'l mal de' fiori.

You managed the (unfortunately now closed) Fondazione "L'Immemoriale di Carmelo Bene" in Rome for several years. For those who don’t know of it, what was its purpose and function?

Carmelo’s testamentary foundation was the natural conclusion of a vaster project that he worked on over the course of 40 years of activity. The foundation was the vision and the resultant destination of the works and property that together were meant to constitute Carmelo Bene’s estate, which was intended for public management and use.

The foundation’s seat was meant to be his residence in Otranto; the house had been purchased specifically with the intent of establishing it as the center of the foundation. It was meant to be a space to safeguard and promote his work, which constituted the archive, the vast library, and the audio-visual media library for use by scholars and researchers. A training center would be maintained by a board of directors from the region of Puglia, the district of Lecce, and the city of Otranto. Administrative entities who readily backed out from the project and, in short, jumped ship by promoting the estate’s liquidation when the inheritors, who had been excluded from the will, launched a fierce attack to contest the will.

Nothing remains from Carmelo’s project. Since 2005, the management of the property and the foundation fell to the heirs. The house became a private residence, and a few months later the assets
were acquired by the region of Puglia through a loan-for-use contract with a duration of 10 years. I hope that, in the taxpayers’ interest, the region of Puglia will at least succeed in digitizing and making available all that material, which Carmelo Bene had bestowed for free. But in these sorts of cases, politics work in mysterious ways.

Are you aware of any unpublished texts of his that may come out in the future? Is there any correspondence between Bene and his friends and contemporaries, or any plays or films that he hoped to direct or perform but wasn’t able to due to his ill health, or other reasons?

To protect everyone’s shared interests, but above all to keep the archive (writings, books, recordings) whole in the future and to avoid its scattering, on February 1st 2005, the Superintendent of Archives for both Lazio and Lecce decreed Carmelo Bene’s collection of historical interest and submitted it to ministerial oversight. We filed an eight-page document for the Ministry that listed the holdings: 1500 volumes with notes written by the author (of which around 540 were annotated and around 1000 were autographed); over 1000 photographs; 700 REVOX reels with the recordings of scores and live performances; 50 agendas and notebooks; and numerous folders containing [proposed] projects.

To complete these lists, we compiled very accurate inventories of the works and catalogued the vast library in his Rome residence; it held a little over 6000 books.

There are numerous projects that were never undertaken. The fifty agendas and notebooks preserved in the collection include ideas that sadly didn’t see the light of day.

With respect to his correspondence, his letters were archived exactly as Carmelo had left them; that is in a Styrofoam box. There weren’t many of them, perhaps around 10. I don’t remember all of them, but I do recall one, because I salvaged it and put it with the others. It was a typed and signed note from Laurence Olivier. He was responding to Carmelo’s missive about some of his theatrical works, and Olivier had replied negatively, such that Carmelo didn’t bother to save it.

Among the unpublished works undoubtedly remains his last literary work *Leggenda*, which comes in the wake of his writing the
book-length poem 'l mal de’ fiorì. In that period, he planned to re-stage the play that would then be titled In-vulnerabilità d’Achille. In this reconstruction he believed to have found proof that Miss (signorina) was missing (mancante) and that these words had a common origin (reattaching himself in this way to the Lacanian concept of the lack of Woman...). He conceived this new poem on the theme of Penthesilea. He had worked on this over the course of the previous years and had shown how roles are played through the use of a dummy. Penthesilea comes alive only when Achilles speaks to her; the word bestows life. The poem had then been adapted, since it was meant to be staged after In-vulnerabilità.


What Bene was reading and what films if any he was watching during his final days?

In his last years, he was reading essays on philosophy; he had read a great deal in the previous years. He read and reread the same books, adding comments in the margins of certain texts. He had discovered and read with interest Carlo Sini. He most certainly was not inclined to read living novelists or poets. Some writer friends would send him their books fresh off the presses; he would only read the dedication, without even opening the book so that he wouldn’t compromise their friendship. He was uncompromising. To offer a few names among his contemporaries, he appreciated Landolfi, Pizzuto, Brancati, and Gadda. Never a woman: he never found a woman writer who stood up to Emily Brontë.

The cinema rarely appealed to him. He called contemporary Italian films “two rooms and a kitchen.” He made an exception for the duo Cipri and Maresco, and for Joao César Monteiro.

How would you describe the importance of music in Carmelo Bene’s world? Did you share his passion for opera? Were there any pieces that he listened to repeatedly?

His relationship with music was profound, and he cultivated it throughout his lifetime. He never undertook any truly formal musical training, and he never learned to read a score, but he was gifted with an incredible ear and an iron will; thanks to these gifts, he trained his own voice following a singular direction: musicality. Opera was his first passion. The version of the Traviata conducted by Toscanini with the NBC orchestra and singers in 1946 was engraved in his memory. For him that performance was the only possible interpretation of the Traviata. In it, the accelerated musical tempos create a series of difficulties that the singers invariably overcome due to their exceptional talents. In certain moments, the drama becomes almost comic, like in the finale when instead of dwindling, it becomes impetuous and violent. Licia Albanese as Violetta, prompted by Toscanini to reconsider the musical tempos, went to visit women suffering from tuberculosis, to ascertain the hysterical symptoms that overtook them.
In the recording, there is a brief passage, only a few minutes, from which Carmelo had learned an important lesson, the letter scene that takes place in the finale. Traditionally, this scene is spoken, and is almost never sung. Licia Albanese executes it in a spoken operatic voice that warrants our attention. Like Carmelo, Albanese was from Puglia, and she had retained its open vowels in her diction; he found it very funny.

He adored in particular Maria Callas and Kathleen Ferrier as well as Giuseppe di Stefano and Tito Schipa, who were all singers who had surpassed their natural limits and on those they had created an exception.

We listened to Verdi’s *Rigoletto* and *Macbeth* for work, but also Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* under the direction of Josef Krips, and *Lucia di Lammermoor*, alternating between the performances of Sutherland and Callas. We listened to everything by Rossini, Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*, executed by Bruno Walter. He wasn’t a fan of Puccini, but he did say that “Musetta’s Waltz” was the most beautiful waltz ever written. Not to mention the composers and musicians with whom he collaborated on the productions of his performances, with extraordinary special appearances, like the poet Amelia Rosselli, who, in 1962, performed live music in the second run of *Spettacolo-concerto Majakovskij*. Over the years, he worked with Bussotti, Zito, Ferrero, Luporini, Lenti, Gelmetti, Romitelli, Bellugi, Panni, Sciarrino, and many others.

*When did Bene first use the amplified voice on stage? What about his cinematic productions? Bene often stated that he sought to demolish the image in his films: In your opinion, did film technology inform in any way his successive theatrical works?*

I think it was the logical consequence of his theatrical research. After his debut with Camus’s *Caligula*, he tackled his second role as an actor in the soloist performance piece *Spettacolo-concerto Majakovski*, with live music by Sylvano Bussotti, where he had no choice but to start exploring instruments that would allow him a greater vocal range. At the end of the 50’s, a theater actor was taught to project his voice so it would reach the back row, which had the effect of reducing the timbric range to only the high notes. Over the years, his col-
Collaborations with musicians became part and parcel of all his stagings, both for recitals and for choral performances. In ’66 for *Il rosa e il nero* with musical elaborations by Vittorio Gelmetti and Sivano Spaccino's songs, he added a new instrument: Paul Ketoff's Syn-ket. Throughout the years he used all the instruments he could find that were conducive to his theatrical research.

He applied the techniques he had learned from making films to the works he later brought to the stage after 1972: a scene’s dubbing added in editing became a playback in the theater. But these are not technical tricks; anyone can shoot a live scene, or allow the actor on stage interpretive freedom. He used phonic equipment and playback to avoid the ambiguity of interpretation. We can only understand the motive and the meaning of this exercise if we consider Carmelo’s entire artistic journey.

Carmelo’s theater, cinema, literature, and poetry represent a singular body of work. He dedicated 40 years of his existence to the “demolition” of preconceived aesthetic and ethical concepts, of cathartic meanings, of manifest engagements in social issues. I explain all this in my book, *Cominciò che era finita* [It Began When it Ended], whose title is a metaphor of life for life.

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2 For info on the Syn-ket, see this site: [http://120years.net/the-syn-ket-or-synthesiser-ketoff-paolo-ketoff-john-eaton-italy-1963/](http://120years.net/the-syn-ket-or-synthesiser-ketoff-paolo-ketoff-john-eaton-italy-1963/)
Bene notes in his autobiography that he often cooked on stage. What in your opinion was the importance of food in his theatrical and cinematic works? What were his favorite Italian dishes?

The choice of using the banquet as a setting where the action would take place in the theater was a direct consequence of the need to escape from theatrical fiction. In the early 60’s, Carmelo, along with a group of faithful collaborators, founded the Teatro Laboratorio, a space repurposed as a theater, with few seats and a platform that served as a stage. As Carmelo often recounted, among the few objects of décor, there was a table which the troupe would gather around. One of the members of the troupe was Manlio Nevastri, who was responsible for preparing food, and this “situation” was often adopted on stage. Moments in which the action revolves around cul-
inary matters happened often. Just to name a few: in *Nostra Signora dei Turchi*, in *S.A.D.E.* *,* in *Don Giovanni*, and in *Capricci*.

In his personal life, Carmelo had habituated his body to a circadian rhythm that took day for night. The theater imposes it. Throughout his adult life, he only ate one meal a day, the evening meal, which often became a late-night meal. He typically got up after noon, drank his coffee, and held out until evening.

When we met in '94, he was the one who did the cooking at first. He was a creature of habit, maniacal with respect to repetition, and immoderate when it came to quantities. For a short time, he continued doing the cooking and the grocery shopping — he ordered by phone — himself. He almost never ate vegetables. He rarely changed his menu; we had the period of fish soup; of roasted peppers; chicken in broth; meatballs; chicory; fried fish, tarte tatin; crème caramel; swordfish; fasolari shellfish; mussels; prosciutto di Parma; bresaola from Val Chiavenna; Felino salame and salt cod. He would buy 20 kilos of spaghetti, 50 cans of peeled tomatoes, 10 kilos of fish, 100 fasolari shellfish, 50 king prawns, 4 lobsters... All that for two people!

In the dinette in his house in Otranto, he had built a fireplace, a barbecue, and an oven that occupied an entire wall. We often cooked Pinocchio’s dogfish, that is to say a ginormous fish that needed to be cooked for hours. This is Carmelo’s way of preparing swordfish: we would have to wait until his local fisherman contact found a fish of extraordinary dimensions, meaning that the diameter of that poor fish had to be greater than 50cm, from which only one fillet, measuring between 12cm and 15cm, would be cut from the top central part of the fish. Once the materia prima was obtained, the procedure for the preparation would start. In the early afternoon, a fire fed with logs exclusively from olive trees would be started. The quantity of logs was determined from the necessity of obtaining embers that would last for several hours. Toward evening, when the flames had died down and the wood had become a red foam, the gigantic fillet of swordfish was placed on the grill. It had to be cooked for one hour on each side. It became totally black, and the first few centimeters of flesh were completely charred. Once it was cooked, the funeral procession bearing the poor remains would make its way to the kitchen, where the charred parts would be cut off with long, sharp knives. Then the heart of the fillet, which had been cooked so as to conserve
the proper moisture and an extraordinary flavor, would be served au naturel.

His cooking was exquisite, but after a while, having recognized my culinary capabilities, he passed the task on to me.

_Do you believe the descriptions of Bene as a narcissist, misogynist, and misanthrope, as some of his friends and many of his detractors would have it, have any validity, or were they merely public perceptions of a mask or persona not representative of his real character?_

He had so vehemently opposed stereotypes that, much to his dismay, he ended up creating one: C.B.ism. He had only one mask, and it was firmly planted on his face, both in private and in public. Any separation of these two spaces was simply inconceivable for him; we could say that he lived as if he were always in public or always in private. To narcissist, misogynist, and misanthrope, I would add megalomaniac. To support his own cause, he had taken the following passage from Leopardi’s _Pensieri_ (XXIV):

_Either I am mistaken, or it is not enough to do laudable things. You must either sing your own praise, or find someone in your stead who will constantly do it for you — which amounts to the same thing — by declaiming and loudly singing your praises to the masses so that others will be compelled, both by means of example and through their passion and perseverance, to repeat some of those praises. People are unlikely to rally around you of their own accord based on your great merits or on the worth of your great works. They will look on and remain eternally silent. If they can, they will prevent others from seeing these things. He who wishes to rise to great heights, even if his intent arises from genuine excellence, must forgo modesty. In this respect, too, the world is like women: you will never get anywhere with them through modesty and discretion._

Misogyny was part of the baggage. His rapport with women was likely born in the bosom of his family’s origins, which were organized by the rule of the matriarchy. With his family, and his mother in particu-
lar, there was tension that lasted throughout his life, so much so that it prevented him from attending both of his parents’ funerals. It wasn’t an eccentric’s retaliation, but rather a decisive consequence of an accumulation of events over the course of years. In one of his appearances on television, Carmelo insisted over and over again that he was against the concept of family; let’s just say that he wasn’t particularly lucky: the residual ‘Family’ joined the original family at last (without being the last).

Carmelo believed that Narcissus commits suicide because what he saw terrified him. We could start here to discuss this subject, and we would probably have to agree that this is only the tip of the iceberg that we call Carmelo Bene.

*What can you tell us about Bene’s philanthropic work with Eduardo De Filippo and the Istituto Filangieri, which was dedicated to reeducating wayward youth in the 1980’s? Were there other causes he supported?*

I read that Carmelo and Eduardo De Filippo had donated the proceeds of some recitals in the 80’s, but I myself do not know anything more about it.

De Filippo continued with his project of rehabilitating young boys in Nisida’s juvenile prison for many years, and I believe Carmelo may have followed him in that philanthropy.

During the years we were together, I often saw him help out his friends when they were struggling, and also supporting humanitarian causes (for example, he had sent money to the victims of the Bosnian War) without rendering his support public.

*In one of his “lettres du voyant,” Rimbaud speaks of the poet’s role of making himself into a seer and his supreme aim of reaching the unknown. Even if such a poet loses the intelligence of his visions, that is immaterial, for he has seen them, and other horrible workers will come and begin from the horizons where he collapsed. What visions do you think Bene saw, or realized? To what pinnacles did you believe he took theater, cinema, and literature? Following this last question: Do you see anyone on the Italian horizon, if not others, who is capable of be-
gimming from the horizons at which Bene collapsed? Is there an artist comparable in stature amongst us now?

His vision drove him to refuse to adhere to the political furor of his contemporaries. Toward the end of the 60’s, he wrote two scripts on Pinocchio: the film didn’t find financing and remains, alongside many others, an unfinished project. At the end of Pinocchio 70, the protagonist, responsible and resigned, joins the crowd participating in the May 1st Labor Day parade, which celebrates their own subjugation. A dream that ended even before it had begun.

The adaptation of this Pinocchio places itself in total opposition to what was being produced in cinema at the time. Today, we have very clear ideas about the political movements from that period — the struggles of the working class, terrorism, the ostracism of the Christian Democrats. This Pinocchio was impossible to make: it would have been a thorn in the side for whoever might have financed it. No ministry, or political party, would have put a penny into it. Here, the working class doesn’t go to paradise; instead it heads towards the precipice of our time.


The premonition of a destiny that had already been inscribed also appears in Nostra Signora dei Turchi — in the passages dedicated to the local inhabitants’ preparations for the arrival of the Turks, the tourists. He had described in abundant detail the particular destiny of that land with 50 years of foresight.

Goffredo Fofi describes in a television interview the difference between being a theatergoer at one of Carmelo’s theatrical performances and at a performance of Living Theatre, wherein the creative
motivation for its pursuit hinges on the audience's full participation; it is a group effort which works when the two parts are entirely fused together. Carmelo, on the other hand, creates a rift between the audience members. He isolates them from one another, and he forces them to take a close look at themselves.

*Il teatro senza spettacolo* and *La ricerca impossibile* are much more than two titles; they are above all two hypotheses, two premises for understanding Carmelo's works, provided, of course, that there is anything to understand, as he would say.

Theater, literature, but I would say all the performative arts in recent years in Italy follow the public's tastes, with the greatest part of their pursuits being geared toward social issues: immigrants, incarceration, victims of abuse; and then there are the full-length adaptations of the classics meant to educate and aimed at school curricula. And in the name of a social engagement that never gives up, the artists must be good people, who are role-models for the next generations.

Italian theater suffers the affronts of public administrations who are forced to take their cues on culture from the majority of voters: presumably the bourgeoisie. In his 1963 film *La ricotta*, Pier Paolo Pasolini has Orson Welles, who plays the director, describe the average Italian: to the question from a reporter, "What do you think about Italian society?", the director replies, "The most illiterate masses and the most ignorant bourgeoisie in Europe." The reporter listens to the director's answer without understanding anything at all. At that point, the director is forced to tell the reporter that he had understood nothing because he's an average Italian: "an average man is a monster, a dangerous delinquent, a conformist, a colonizer, a racist, a proponent of slavery, and apathetic." Not much has changed since the Italy of '63. The illiteracy of the less well-off social classes has united with the return of the illiteracy of the media and the upper middle class, a tragic pairing for the health of the country.

The end of the 20th century carried with it all the intellectual conflicts, including ideologies, leaving this container empty, this blank page, which sooner or later someone will name. We can't wait.
INTERVIEW WITH MEHDI BELHAJ KACEM
BY MICHAËL CREVOISIER & DAVID BULIARD

Stanley Kubrick, 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

Translated by Rainer Hanshe

Michael Crevoisier: The theme of the game occurs throughout your work and returns in your most recent philosophy. What place does it hold for you, and how does it function in your system?¹

Mehdi Belhaj Kacem: Yes, it’s true that it remains intact. And I can recapitulate today how it works systematically.

¹ Interview conducted on 1 March 2013 in Besançon, during a public discussion organized at the Sandals d’Empédocle bookstore in partnership with the University of Franche-Comté & the logics of the act (Philosophy Laboratory). Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Michaël Crevoisier, and David Buliard, «Entretien» in Philosophique, Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, «Annales littéraires» (2014) 13–40. See: https://journals.openedition.org/philosophique/869
First of all, what I call archi-transgression is the transcendental of the human being, the fact that the human being has appropriated the laws of nature and continues to appropriate them anew. But to sum up, let’s say that it is every scientific word in one, as we proceed in philosophy; my only originality, which comes from my auto-didacticism, is that I show that there is always a circuition between the empirical and the transcendental. I do not act like most philosophers, at least the professional and academic ones. In Kant, in Husserl, you are given the transcendental like that; or in Badiou, where logic is the transcendental. While I still feel the need to say, logic, mathematics, is a sophistication of the most archaic techniques, which are hunting, agriculture, etc., what I call the archi-events: science; and at the beginning what is called tekhnè (tekhnè is the other name of science itself, it then ramifies itself in all of the sciences). I am always looking for the empirical fact by which we appropriate the transcendental. All that to say that the archi-transgression is the first event specific to the human being: the appropriation of the laws of nature.

As soon as the laws of nature and science are appropriated, there is a regime of laws that is mimicked by nature and which is superadded to what the human being has appropriated, which are the laws of politics: manners, family, which begins with the tribal, etc. The tribal, moreover, still maintains itself with animals; but it does not prevent — the word is already in the forbidden fruit, that is, technique. Because technique is what very quickly brings an expropriatory violence that does not exist in the rest of the animal kingdom, then, to try to compensate this expropriatory violence, it obviously takes a very long time, and it is called Law. Because in the beginning it is essentially horrors, it remains the law of the strongest as with animals, but at a much higher power, it is of such violence that the human being confusedly understands that it is necessarily strengthened by laws that regulate the injustice of the master and the slave. I recapitulate all of this in this fundamental moment of my thought: the appropriation of the laws of nature, that’s the scientific, which results in an expropriation, and it is called politics, the regime of laws whose other beings, even other animals are not capable of, through those whom do not appropriate the laws of which they are subjects, the so-called natural laws. Because even if there are forms of
appropriation in other animals, they are only embryonic in relation to what the human being has done. It ends up in a regime of generalized expropriation called politics. In this, the appropriation of laws leads to the appearance of new laws on earth, of which animals are incapable: there are little rites in animals, territories, etc., but not an enactment of the rules of civic co-existence as it appears among human beings.

MC: It is therefore the dialectic between the law and the rule, present in Society,² that you reinvest here; but you no longer use it as such.

MBK: I think about it, but actually I do not utilize it directly at this time. Nevertheless, I watch the movement of Society in the sense that today I still maintain that indeed the game as the appearance of politics (which by definition is horrible), it is a system of generalized expropriation. And even this regime of laws that is invented after the fact so that co-existence does not change at any moment in the civil war, history has proven that it only worked halfway ... even if it works at all. I say it works at all because, what would have happened if we had not been able to add these laws? Simply, there are laws, like that of work, which are suffered painfully. Because we do not spontaneously like to work, except when we love our work, etc., or we do not like paying taxes, paying bills, we do not like to submit to this entire set of laws which add to the laws of being and nature which science has appropriated. So that kind of law, in the civic sense, rules in the civic sense (which I do not differentiate for the moment), are painful.

In spite of everything, there is an anthropological domain where the constraint of the rule becomes voluptuous. And here we are already in the question of parody, even if in fact we are still there, because at bottom, the sciences are a parody, they are already the parody of the laws of nature, hunting is a parody of predation, agriculture a travesty of picking and grazing, etc. We are so much in parody as, literally, a second nature, that we will act as if the rules of civil co-existence were natural laws, we will act as if to brush our teeth in the morning and wash was natural; it’s going so far. After all, the observation is very simple, with me unlike Bataille, or a number of other thinkers, there is no somewhat

² Belhaj Kacem, Society (Tristram, 2001).
fluid metaphysics of play: life as a game, etc. There are these themes there, but on the condition of supplementing which for me really starts from the observation and the love for the facticity of games as they exist, really concrete games, from sport to chess.

MC: An anthropology of the game?

MBK: It’s a pleonasm ... though. Because we have the impression that some animals seem to be sensitive to music, such as whales for example, we do not have the impression that they are sensitive to painting or sculpture, not to mention poetry. Yet we see that the game is something else. Among animals there are really embryonic forms of play, and it may be the only form of art that we really have in common with them. For example, we see very well that when cats play with each other they are already in parody: we can see that they are fighting, they are nibbling, and so on; that is, they pretend to fight. But sometimes they do not pretend and there they bristle, they will massacre themselves. And it’s quite rare; we see that to fight is a state of exception at home. On the other hand we see them fighting to laugh, it’s something deep enough I think. So it seems that with animals, and apparently, by chance, especially since they are animals that are very close to us like cats or dogs, there is something like play. They seem even more sensitive to playing than to music. Unlike the snake, they do not seem very sensitive to the music that is broadcast all day. Although there may be exceptions; we sometimes see on YouTube a cat who is like that, slumped in a couch and watching a hard rock concert, but we say that it is completely stupid and that it has nothing to do with the hard rock concert.

So that’s my main thought, and that’s why, later, when I started reading Aristotle’s Poetics again, it made me think about katharsis. Because how to understand katharsis if we consider play from the outset as an art form? That is to say, if we harden the hypothesis by considering that all the games we create are an art form. And including, as I say, the Olympics, since suddenly we see that among the Greeks they were considered as such, that is to say not only as an art form, but as the greatest art form, the most sacred, the most religious. You were right to
tell me yesterday, and of course it’s the difference with contemporary soccer. But it is not certain that the difference is so abysmal precisely because soccer is an atheistic religion, that’s all. Just look at the Italians who are so Catholic — we feel that their true religion is still soccer. At the Vatican they go there by tradition because their grandmother went there and they really want to show that they are good believers; it’s like mafiosos who will meet a cardinal to wash away their sins. But, deep down, it seems to me that the religious fervor goes to Milan AC and Juventus rather than to Benedict XVI.

But here it is, the observation is very simple, it consists in saying why it is only in the form of the game, independently of the laws of nature and of being that apply to everyone, that we accept constraint? Because finally, we can not do anything against the laws of nature, so we don’t have to complain about being subjected to it, whereas concerning political laws, social rules, we complain all the time, since always and still today; like the French who, it is well known, are grumblers. We’re always rattling, and rightly so; I’m very Rousseauist about it, we complain very quickly about the innumerable constraints of culture. For example, no one forces you to put on glasses, it’s not a natural necessity, and it’s the same thing with getting dressed, and so on. Except that if I don’t get dressed and if it’s -15°C, not only do I risk catching a bad cold, but in addition I may be in legal trouble. This is what transgression means in the very simple sense. And the question of the game is essentially this one. For me, the key question is why do we not enjoy supernumerary rules, that is, rules other than those of nature and being, than in play? And we suddenly see in the game that most people do not cheat (although of course there are always cheats), that for once, during the game, most people submit to the rule, whereas when it comes to work, bills, etc. this is not the case. The paradox is that we cheat much more readily with everyday business, for taxes, etc., than when we play. So of course, we take a liking to dress, etc., but the main thing is that in the beginning the game is really the aesthetic sphere where the relationship to the rule becomes enjoyable. And that’s what interests me.
David Bulliard: You say that there are also forms of parody in animals, as in cats, for example. I say that to return to the question of the origin of this parody and to start to approach the question of sexuality. There is an ethologist, Dominique Lestel, who has worked on those topics in recent years and who for example sees the premises of human culture in the courtship of animals, as a totally free act. Would you see with this question of sexuality the birth of parody, the original act of parody?

MBK: Yes, I would be quite ready to add it to my work, to recognize such observations.

DB: But in this case, how does that translate to the anthropological level? How would you explain the link between sexuality and parody?

MBK: It’s like everything, the answer to your question also engages what I say, that is, it’s a reversal of all the old metaphysical prejudices. Martin Heidegger and Reiner Schürmann have gone very far in this direction, through great destructive texts, or rather destroyer-builders. I do not know how to say it. That suits my anarchist, romantic temperament — we burn and then something emerges. What do I mean by that? I grant all this and I will say how in the end.

As usual, in the anthropological enclosure, it is always more sophisticated. Sc&hellip;M for example can really be considered a parody of the game; and it is a parody. A few days ago I wrote a very simple sentence (it’s like in music, you always have the same musical theme): I told myself that masochism is basically a parody of jouissance. What we need to think about is the short time (3000, 4000, 10,000 years) from which we have been the most powerful on earth. Because deep down, what do we miss from those animals to come to parody as we practice it? We know that some practice courtship, others make bridges, nests, and so on. But for us, at one point there was a global technological hold that allowed us to surrender to other animals. And what they lack is exactly what we needed, Darwin said it, to become what we are in this fairly short time. Because we must remember that, compared to evolution, history is very, very short; since Darwin we know that it took millions of years of evolution to see our species appear. And we had a bit of luck, although we also know that that luck, now, can disappear extremely quickly.
In another way, what would happen if we saw our domestic animals rub two flints together? Of course, they cannot because one of the principal determinations of man is precisely prehension. And the phenomenology of the hand is also very important, because before technology, before logic, before mathematics, it is certainly through the hand that our first appropriation was made. Everything is based on ownership. Thus, there is more appropriation in life on earth than in the mineral kingdom, there is more in the plant than in primitive molecular life, then there is also more in the animal than in the vegetable, then comes the technological appropriation that assumes a particular type of animal ownership that is the hand. But what would happen if all of a sudden we saw monkeys, they are so clever, start rubbing flints and really become so-called scholarly monkeys, but by themselves? Obviously, we would be very scared. It’s the same as in Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey: we are very scared when we see the monolith because nature is not able to make squares, circles, etc. And it is in this way, in my way, that I unsettle the statements of the type of those from Galileo to Badiou by way of Descartes, without returning to Plato, and which consist in saying that nature is written in mathematical language, that it is composed of geometric shapes, etc. Is it so certain? And if in 2001 we are so afraid when we see the monolith, it is because we say that nature cannot make geometric shapes, and therefore that the monolith can only be the product of a form of thinking life, an extra-terrestrial technology that is more powerful than us and will destroy us. For me, nature is not written in mathematical language, and if we use mathematics, it is only in the same way as hunting or agriculture; it is only utilitarian. Mathematics is only made to exploit nature; it has only served that purpose. This allows me to say that the controversy with Badiou raises the problem of the so-called innocence of mathematics, and a truly ontological scope of mathematics and logic. And I remain very Hegelian, because for me everything must always be phenomenalized. And one of the ways in which mathematics is phenomenalized is not with respect and adaptation to the laws of nature, it is a violation, a destructive non-coincidence: it’s Fukushima.
MC: But to return to the question of animality, could one go so far as to say that you think rather of a difference of degree and not of nature between man and animal?

MBK: I’m more Hegelian than that. Let’s say I’m Hegelianizing Bergson. It’s a difference of degree that becomes a difference of nature. It’s dialectical. But actually at the base it is only a difference of degrees until at the moment when there is a changeover. So, obviously, we can not exactly locate this shift, but it is not the function of philosophy to specify it. Nevertheless, today it is one of the many violent disagreements I have with Badiou. We can no longer make our goody-goody gestures and trust the way in which language works. Philosophically, we simplify in a single idea of the event a quantity of extremely disparate events, which means that, there are quite a lot of small jumps of degrees that abstain under a single concept: technology, science, etc. But to recapitulate those little jumps which at the beginning are actually only differences of degrees become in the end a difference of nature as an event.

And that’s why 2001 is more and more my favorite movie, at least for philosophy. This is the film that makes me think the most because all of my themes are there. Whenever I need an illustration it is sufficient for me to think of 2001. And in that case, we see that when the monkeys take a bone it is only a difference of degrees, whereas in fact, and it is very well shown by Kubrick, this simple difference of degrees becomes a difference of nature. With the cinematic ellipse we pass directly from the primitive birth of technology to spaceships. How better to say it!

MC: In relation to what you just said, the question I would like to ask you now concerns myth. In the sense that I feel that within your philosophy there is a link between play & myth. More specifically, could we say that play is a kind of replacement of the absence of myth? And that the player would be this new hero modernity would need rather than some return to the mythical hero preached here and there?

MBK: I had not thought of it like that. But yes, we could say so. And that’s what I thought under the constraint of Badiou, but thanks to Ines-
which was already the start of the break. Jean-Clet Martin had also written a very good article about that book, which was called by chance Lacoue Kills Badiou and it was perhaps a bit premonitory because I had not yet decided to break with Badiou; even though I was already very depressed because of that, I could not stand it anymore. What is certain is that the Lacoue-Labarthian conception of heroism suited me more in its very fragility, in its references. For Lacoue, modern heroism is Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, whereas in Badiou heroism would be rather the classical gladiator, the soldier, or even Wagner. And especially the Wagner of Parsifal, which is his favorite opera, and which is undoubtedly my most hated opera. Recently, some friends suggested that I go see him, and I told them that I tried a thousand times, but each time I had ulcers while looking at him: I am allergic.

It is therefore very fair to say that I have tried to find in these debates a theme that is receptive to heroism today. I continue to be in complete agreement with all that Lacoue-Labarte says about this. So yes, the heroism of Lacoue-Labarte or Schürmann suits me, unlike that of Badiou, and I said what I had to say about it. But it is true that it is very useful to remind me because it is the same thing: “The player rather than the hero”; in fact it makes me return to my fundamentals, as we say in soccer. It’s the same question: the player rather than the hero, the game rather than the myth. And that’s exactly it because it’s the old question of the philosophical condemnation of tragedy. In this condemnation by Plato we see, moreover, that it is less Sophocles than Homer, because it is the mythological charge in art that is attacked, that is to say in religion. All that to say that there is indeed an absolutely inevitable becoming-game of art, an idea that goes against exactly what makes people believe, without saying it directly, like Badiou and Slavoj Žižek who, with their rehabilitation of Wagner, simply call for a new mythologization, a new heroization of art.

And I remember very well that it was this point that really was (although many other things have accumulated) the reason for my depression; probably also because I work in my area, so it’s pretty Nietzsche-

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an: we dramatize because we’re all alone in our corner, we’re not there to do symposiums, to discuss all the time with colleagues, etc., all those things that usually make things go more smoothly. If my work is sometimes of a violence that one does not meet in university production, and I say it without boasting but only to make a clinical description, it is because I live it more carnally, I incorporate it more. It is true that one morning I woke up without being able to get up: this is true clinical depression; and I said to myself: Mao and Wagner are not possible, Stalin and Wagner are not possible, I can not be in solidarity with that. I almost want to brag by saying “heroism of depression.”

All this is, moreover, very coherent, because obviously Lacoue-Labarthe and Schürmann were great depressive philosophers, much more than I am. But for me, good philosophy must not be depressing, and I never feel depressed when I read Schürmann when it is an extremely negative philosophy, more negative than anything we have seen in the whole world history of philosophy. That’s probably why he’s still not read. Basically Schürmann’s philosophy is scary, but in my opinion for good reasons, and conversely, it is the very good philosophy like that of Badiou who is always triumphalist, who is always positive, who is always promising lots of future singing, eventually depressed me completely. Because what is really depressing is obviously the joyous but bad philosophy. Nothing depresses me more than to read Michel Onfray for example, because he claims to be Nietzschean whereas for me he is only a block of pure resentment towards all that has been written. Someday something must be written about it: “Mr. Onfray or Ressentiment,” the anti-Nietzschean par excellence, the very figure of democratic resentment. Because it’s very easy to say that you’re on the side of Lucretius, Nietzsche, but any fool can do it, any fool can feel like he understands Nietzsche because he’s easy to read. But let’s move on.

It is by talking about it now that I realize the coherence of my approach. I needed, with Inesthetics et Mimesis, when I was in a state of depression, to choose Lacoue-Labarthe’s depressive heroism (to say so very quickly) against Badiou’s muscular heroism. It is from this conception of heroism that I needed at that moment, even if it is true that fundamentally it is not a new figure of heroism that I seek. I prefer to abandon the word heroism, even if I can defend it on specific points,
especially if it is Lacoue-Labarthe who speaks about it, but it’s true that basically the real intuition was the player; “the virtuosity of the game,” I think, Hölderlin said about tragedy.

MC: But then would there be a possible rehabilitation of the Trickster? This conceptual figure that you had at the time of the group and Evidenz magazine, and which already corresponded almost to that: the playful promise of an exit from the end of heroism.

MBK: There are both. I would say that what embarrasses me is a schizophrenia between, say, depressive heroism, which is the one I needed, and the Trickster, which existed well before. I say depressive heroism, but in fact I am more of a tortured person than a depressive one. But it’s true that at the time of the break with Badiou that’s really what it was. Not a depressive heroism in itself, but rather, to say it very quickly and without milling about, a post-Auschwitz heroism. We could talk about Paul Celan; it’s something I needed. The Trickster came before and from 2003 onward I did not need it anymore, I was not amongst people enough to be a Trickster again. But I could say that the record is pretty good, because finally I ask that to come back in the race, but say that between 2003 and 2013 I did a pose with the Trickster. Although, even by myself in my corner, I still remained a bit Trickster in the sense of a non-academic philosopher who invites himself to the banquet, the surprise guest. Yes, of course, but it was there before, so let’s say that I pursued the Trickster in other ways, and that between 2003 and 2013 I needed the post-Auschwitz heroism of Lacoue-Labarthe and only the Trickster Schürmann, that’s it. But maybe it’s time I found the Trickster, it would not be a bad idea ...

MC: So can we expect something like a regenerated Trickster?

MBK: As I speak I cannot prejudge what the future will be, I don’t even know what, literally, will be done tomorrow; we’ll see, but I only ask for that. But to finish on the Trickster, we must not forget that there was also a tragic side, in the sense that, and it is always the same, it meant first of all the succession of the tragedy, but without taking too much seriously. It’s a serious game, or a playful tragedy: an oxymoron. With
the Trickster it’s a matter of taking seriously what you do, but not too much, that is, enough, but without it becoming a first-class heroism, one is always at the limit of the fascist — that is the case with Badiou, and even with Žižek when he makes himself a clown, because when Žižek talks about Stalin, he talks seriously about Stalin.

And to finish also on what I said concerning my loneliness, I must add that it is not the consequence of the fact that I would be of a solitary or an asocial character: all my friends will say the opposite. The day someone will be interested in this, “Why MBK’s dereliction from 2003 to 2013?” But friends will say, “I don’t know if something happened to him that we did not understand, but in 2003 something very serious happened.” But this aspect would be more the motive of literature, what Blanchot calls the inner death, because I am someone rather very social, I like very much to speak with my friends, I am a real chatterbox, very talkative; I do not stop cutting people, I’m unbearable.

MC: You have frequently quoted Lacoue-Labarthe and Schürmann as two contemporary philosophers very important to you today, who have deeply marked your work, and who, finally, are rather outside the university circuit, in the sense that they are not really read by academics, or not enough as you say. So how are they for you fundamental authors? You say at one point that Schürmann would be almost equal to Badiou.

MBK: Yes, and I was even cautious; now I would say that Schürmann is not almost, but really at the height of Badiou. It is true that Schürmann, because of all the reasons that you mentioned, did not have the opportunity to produce a work. While conversely, Badiou — I will try not to be rude — as soon as he has a little thing to publish, he publishes. Schürmann did not publish much because he did not have the ten thousandth of Badiou’s audience. Le prêche only has this meaning at bottom. And it’s the same with someone like Lacoue-Labarthe. What I liked with Lacoue-Labarthe was the flood that he had produced at home.

For my own concepts and, I am not afraid of the word, for my own system, they are authors to whom I owe much more than to Badiou, and it is this kind of misunderstanding that I wanted to stop with the
release of After Badiou.⁴ To the point that today my philosophy is what one can imagine most hostile to Badiou, even to his metaphysics; and beyond the crumbs and little disgusting anecdotes on which obviously the journalists lingered. That’s what I said yesterday in private: everyone cares that Wagner accused Nietzsche of compulsive masturbation! No one says that the break between the two was related to that. So what? And even though Nietzsche got angry with Wagner, and even though I got angry for bad psychological reasons with Badiou, in the end it’s not important. And that’s also the game; it’s a pretty childish report, because I come from outside and when we humans are lucky to get caught, to be invited to the great philosophical banquet is like a mixture of terror and wonder that I feel. This is still the case today when in three weeks I will be at Normale Sup’. That is why I always feel like a child; childhood is the game, and I am this child who has fallen by chance into a large playground where the most interesting game in the world takes place, a little like Pinocchio when he falls upon the island of toys.

But to come back to what I was saying, what is very liberating with Lacoue-Labarthe is that he develops his philosophy with means initially and apparently much more technically modest than those of Badiou. With Badiou it’s always the heavy artillery, the tanks, the Panzer company, it really still has to be mathematics, the cultural revolution and its millions of dead and tortured (even if he will never talk about the dead and tortured). But what I say about Lacoue-Labarthe is not true for Schürmann, whose work is far more scholarly, far more difficult to read, far more erudite. Schürmann has a very academic side, with endless footnotes and sophisticated editorial references, as do all very advanced academics. There is a little strong side to Schürmann’s theme that is sometimes unpleasant, that is not found at all in Lacoue-Labarthe.

The attitude of Lacoue-Labarthe has something to do with it, dare to say a word that is a bit easy, rock ‘n’ roll. I have read a book by Avital Ronell published by Stock, in the same collection in which Being and Sexuation will be released,⁵ in which she talks about the death of Lacoue-Labarthe. Lacoue-Labarthe loved the blues — which shows his

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⁴ Belhaj Kacem, After Badiou (Grasset, 2011).
⁵ Belhaj Kacem, Être et sexuation (Stock, 2013).
somewhat non-academic side and makes him all the more likeable. But he never said anything, it’s a shame, we would have liked him to write a book on jazz; he only wrote about the misunderstanding of jazz by Adorno. Because Adorno hated jazz, for him only dodecaphonic music counted, all the rest was nothing but barbarism. But Lacoue-Labarthe demonstrates this misunderstanding by revealing a rather vulgar vision of jazz on the part of Adorno. But it’s a pity that Lacoue did not write a great book of aesthetic philosophy on jazz. And so his passion for jazz went to the blues he loved. Ronell says throughout her book that at the moment of dying, these are really her last words, she asks him: “Are you ok, Philippe?” — “Not too much, I have a kind of blues”; and he died a few minutes later. I like these little anecdotes, I’m pretty feminine that way, that’s why I like Ronell too; I find her funny, she does not hesitate to say that she is a complete, unbearable hysterics, which also explains why Badiou does not like her. But me, it is this performative side that I like; it too is pretty rock ‘n’ roll.

More profoundly, what these authors bring me, and what I try to remain faithful to today is also and above all the negative character of their philosophy, which proceeds directly from their relationship to Auschwitz. This type of philosophy comes after Auschwitz, but already also a little before, with Benjamin or Bataille, who had a very subjective sense of what the academics — the big ones — did not sense, or that they presented badly as Heidegger (who even felt upside down we could say). Heidegger, precisely who, from 1936–38, begins to realize that heroism as a revival of the German people, he begins to stink a little. But at the same time he did not dare to admit it completely, because even during the war the French Heideggerians, until 1944, do not take the measure of Heidegger’s sentences saying that Hitler and Mussolini are the only two men who tried to save Europe from nihilism. And it’s not nothing to say that! So Heidegger continued to oscillate even during the war, he continued his inflection. There is thus in Heidegger a schizophrenia, that is to say, something that interests me, while seeing the horrors of Nazism, he continues to oscillate. However, it seems to me that we must focus on what is wrong at all. Benjamin and Bataille did not oscillate because they were only interested in the catastrophic side of things. And then, after Auschwitz, we see the appearance of
negative philosophies. This for me is a crucial historical novelty, a historical invention in the philosophy of the century that is very important and is starting to be a little forgotten today. They forget each other because, quite frankly, to take a German caricature, we are tired of hearing about Auschwitz all the time. For example, Agamben is a little weary about this, it becomes almost a kind of Auschwitz motive, it’s almost an Auschwitzian academicism. But the important thing in my opinion, what we should not give up, but I feel a little lonely today in this field, is the fidelity to those negative philosophies.

And especially Schürmann and Lacoue-Labarthe, because they are not yet widely read. What is remarkable about them is, I would say, the fact that they do not give in on the question of evil. Even if there is no concept of evil in Lacoue-Labarthe, there is nevertheless an obsession with evil, which I obviously feel very close to. And Schürmann says it even better than that: with Schelling he is the only one in the history of philosophy to propose a real concept of evil. And all that does not arise in philosophy without reason. If Schelling makes a concept of evil just after the French Revolution and the episode of the Terror, if Heidegger is interested in that Schelling there, the one who invents a concept of evil, in 1936, it is not by chance, etc.

That is very simply, and to sum up what brings me closer to Schürmann and Lacoue-Labarthe. They are people who do not give in on the question of evil. What I would like to say is that there are enough stories, enough big accounts of philosophical fairies, enough tomorrows that sing, enough pseudo-initiatory procedures in the direction of the Good, the best, the greatest, etc., etc. Badiou namely, the Wagner of philosophy. Now philosophy can be a task. And if I’m a little depressed, as I was on the train yesterday, that’s also why I make a systematic philosophy of what destroys, that’s it. What is destructive? What is destroying human beings? What destroys me, what draws me as Lacoue-Labarthe would say in a poem?

MC: To stay with Schürmann and perhaps address a point you have not talked about yet, I would like you to tell us a little more about how you reinvest what he called The Law of Anarchy. In the last part of After Badiou entitled “The Political Sinthome,” which you consider besides as
a full volume of L’Esprit du nihilisme, you speak of a “metaphysical anarchism.” What do you mean by that?

MBK: Yes, absolutely. But that I have to dig further. I admit that I have not yet opened the file; it is only a draft.

MC: If I ask this question it is also because we are in Besançon, the city of Proudhon, Fourier, and so those political writers of the 19th C, of whom finally you speak rather seldom, why?

MBK: It’s the same question — one day I’ll have to reopen all those files there. What is the exclusion of Bakunin by Marx, what is the turning point of the Socialist International, etc? Because at the beginning all of this is historical. Wagner was not totally unfriendly at first; he was even a friend of Bakunin’s. For example, when there was the revolt in Dresden, a small, almost German commune, Wagner was on the barricades with Bakunin, only after racism, pre-Nazism, creation, Lacoue-Labarthe saw very well, pure and simple the Nazi imagery. National aesthetics, as Lacoue says, Nietzsche understood right away. That is why, when Lacoue reads Nietzsche’s texts about his break with Wagner and Bayreuth, he shows how it is an extremely accurate description of Nazism fifty years before its advent. But as Lacoue also says, Bayreuth, it is not a prefiguration, it is not a harbinger of Nazism; Bayreuth is the creation of Nazism.

To say also all that I owe to Lacoue-Labarthe, I must specify the character, let us say seduction of his texts. And it is the same thing with Schürmann — they are contemporaries of a high level of thought which, and in particular concerning Schürmann, for me, make me think about the power of Nietzsche, Bataille, or Debord when one listens to them at the beginning. That is to say that with them there is a seduction of reading that is more immediate. Schürmann and Lacoue-Labarthe really open our eyes to the relationship between art and politics. And what they show is that it goes much further than we commonly think. Of course, there are engaged or pseudo-engaged artists, there is no lack of message-artists, but Lacoue-Labarthe leads to a point where the relationship between art and politics is much more sophisticated and, above all, highly impactual, say. So it’s true philosophy, that’s what Pla-
to promises us. And this promise of philosophy I find more fulfilled in Lacoue-Labarthe and Schürmann, than in Badiou. While Badiou promises us access to truly superior truths, they are the same but upside down: let’s go to the heart of darkness, as in Apocalypse Now, which is one of my favorite films for a long time. Moreover, the novel of the film, which I ended up reading, was one of Lacoue-Labarthe’s favorite novels, entitled The Heart of Darkness. We must go to the heart of darkness. It’s a responsibility. And it’s true that for me it’s a true heroism, rather than delighting, say, like Badiou, people who have suffered in your place, and then to swagger as a philosopher, happy and satisfied with himself, doing the promotion of the massacres of the Cultural Revolution and Pol-pot. Because we feel that, basically, even concerning Pol-Pot, Badiou only half regrets, or Schönberg who was a patient, a depressive, a neurotic, if he is not a neuropath, first paranoid, etc. But for Badiou the philosopher, all that is transformed into something positive, good, the eternal truths, etc. Whereas for me the true heroism, because it is really sacrificial, it is rather in abnegation, something really disinterested, it is people like Lacoue-Labarthe or Schürmann who dare to go where it is not nice, and watch ...

MC: But we can say that you had already experienced being young in the 90s. In your first books, and especially your novels, there was already this intuition. When you write Anteform, for example, it seems to me that this intuition is already there, that you have to touch, go to the heart of darkness, and so on. But perhaps in another way, with another relation to writing.

MBK: It’s not for me to say. I prefer to admire others rather than revel in my own heroism. And with L’Antéforme I do not think so, because in that book there is a positivity in the research. But anyway there is an ambiguity in philosophy. And I think that deep down that is also the case with Schürmann and Lacoue-Labarthe. Because even if they are really sacrifices, even if there is a real danger in going to the heart of darkness, the fact remains that at one point in philosophy, when one finds an idea, a slightly new sentence, it’s still a pleasure. So even in philosophy, unfortunately, there is always, constitutively, this ambiguity of

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6 Belhaj Kacem, The Anteform (Tristram, 1997).
katharsis, that is, the mimetic appropriation of what is wrong. Even close to horror there will always be this ambiguity, and someone like Lacoue-Labarthe is ethically irreproachable on this. And that goes back to what I said earlier: Schürmann’s reading never depresses me because he writes things that are not really gay, to say the least. In the same way it does not depress me to read Lacoue-Labarthe while he also speaks essentially about what is wrong. With perhaps a nuance about his poems which are still a little depressing. But all the same, there is as much ethics in his poetry as in his philosophy. And it is true that in his philosophy there is always an energy, a stylistic elegance, and of course the pleasure of thought. While in his poems on the other hand he is still really depressive.

MC: You also say at the end of Inesthetics and Mimesis, concerning one of Lacoue-Labarthe’s poems, that this is the only possible poem today.

MBK: Yes, but I pressed the issue a bit. And besides, as luck would have it, the publisher of Nous, who himself is a poet with whom I obviously fell out with following the publication of After Badiou since, along with some other publishers, Badiou is a bit his publishing milk cow, he pointed out that I exaggerated a little with Lacoue-Labarthe saying that it was the last possible poem. When he himself writes poetry that’s a bit ... no, no, but be careful, he’s not a bad poet, that’s not what I’m saying. But it’s true that I have an aesthetic difference with him. There is something in his poetry ... it should be analyzed at length; but let’s move on. No, because he’s a very good poet by the way.

But I mention it anyway, because it’s true that Lacoue-Labarthe is a bit like the films of Michael Haneke that I hated for a long time until I realized that his cinema was still interesting. Haneke films violence precisely like no other filmmaker, he shows it without aestheticizing it. It’s like Pasolini in Salo, which unlike all the other films, does not offer a cinema of violence made for the exhibition of exploded brains, and which we’ll find fun, very addictive, etc. For example, I love Dario Argento, this fascination with horror, violence, katharsis in the most direct sense, like Cronenberg. But hey, they make horror something beautiful, delectable, cathartic in the most hackneyed sense. It’s true that one day I realized that there was something about Haneke, and that what I did
not like was still interesting. Basically I understood when I rented the US version of *Funny Games*; for two nights I had insomnia, which is rather rare with me. I said to myself: you can watch the movie, it will not stop you from sleeping so much you need sleep. And the film scared me so much that I had insomnia for the third time in a row. For a week again I thought about this film constantly, I thought that it was not possible, a film as horrible, as atrocious. And it is true that there is a counter-aesthetic, a Brechtism say of extreme violence. A violence that can no longer be sublimated, that we can no longer find the least amusing; there is not the usual cathartic thrill, in the broad sense. With Haneke’s films, we are not rid of violence when we see it, we are cornered. So there is a real ethic that I am defending today, and which appears all the more with Lacoue-Labarthe.

MC: *To return to poetry, I still think of Inesthetics and Mimesis, which is a book where you also frequently speak of Lautréamont. You mention the project that you had to devote a book to him, and more particularly to continue the analysis of his Poesies.*

MBK: Yes, it’s ambiguous, I thought about it recently, about le Ligne de risque. I would say that there is a lot of resistance toward the reading that I propose of Lautréamont, and in that case, I felt the other time when I was talking with Yannick Haenel. Because on the one hand it is for them to defend a Heideggerian and therefore anti-Platonic position, and alternatively to claim, in part, the legacy of *situs*. But suddenly this double position bothers me because now I recognize, reluctantly, it is true, this ultra-Platonic moment, this Platonism in Debord and the *situs* which is blinding, which is obviousissism. And it is always the same thing: this movement by which it is a question of converting evil into good, of replacing art with politics, and so on. But when I say that to the Ligne de risque! Because right now they are a bit of the theoretical owners of *situs*. But it is an example among others on this report about Lautréamont, and I do not say it in bad part; I really like le Ligne de risque, I feel closer to them than to many people in the contemporary intellectual landscape. Simply, there is a hyper-flagrant Platonism in Lautréamont, that of the *Poésies*. These are the types of barriers that should be removed. If I tell them that Lautréamont is a reproduction of
the Platonic gesture, it is obvious that it will only provoke, as we say in
psychoanalysis, a resistance; while it’s so obvious. But for them not:
“We are Heideggerians and Nietzscheans so we are anti-Platonists so
Lautréamont can not be Platonist,” etc. And it would be the same for
Sollers. Maybe one day I’ll write this book. But it’s been a long time
since I had re-read *Les Chants de Maldoror*. I had only re-read the
*Poésies* on the occasion of *Inesthetics and Mimesis*. And yes, the *Poésies*
are really a rewrite, almost a paraphrase of the *Republic*, with more di-
versions, that is, whole sentences are taken from authors who are al-
most all Platonists, like Pascal, etc. There was a very very good inter-
view with Sollers in le Ligne de risque, precisely centered on Lau-
tréamont, wherein Sollers talks about Aragon, the surrealists, and then,
today, of course: “me Sollers and you le Ligne de risque.” What struck
me is the great absence in this interview: he does not speak once of
Debord, and it’s still curious from Sollers, he who has thought about
Debord for many years. And Haenel explained it very simply, because at
that moment there appeared a tome of Debord’s correspondence in
which he very much insulted Sollers. How to speak of the Lautréamont
effect without mentioning Debord? This interview was also excellent,
but it stings a bit.

At the same time, it is often like this when one announces a book
project, as with Lacoue-Labarthe for example. He often says that some-
day he will talk about this or that but then he never wrote a book about
it. But sometimes the sentence is enough. And for the moment every-
thing I have to say about Lautréamont is written in *Inesthétique and
Mimèsis*. It’s not because I say I’m going to talk about it that I’ve already
written more about it. Maybe even that I said everything that I had to
say.

DB: *But concerning this Platonic pitfall you’re talking about, and be-
cause it’s really hard to ignore, can you explain it to us more precisely?
And also in relation to what you said earlier, that there is always this
cathartic positivity of philosophy, behind and despite the fact of raking
in the most absolute evil.*

MBK: It’s weird because it’s something I used to say while walking: it’s
not possible not to be a Platonist. As if Platonism was the original sin of
philosophy. Simply because there is always the operation of duplication. There is always a dualism of philosophy. Even among the most anti-dialectical philosophers, for example post-Heideggerians, we always need, as Deleuze says, a conceptual couple. Because it is the fundamental human fact: the mimetic duplication, the parody, then the parody of the parody, etc. Then one might wonder to what extent Aristotle remains a Platonist, he who spoke of katharsis, but he will also have to wait for Hegel, and even Hegel will realize it, it will be necessary to wait for Lacoue-Labarthe to realize that katharsis, mimesis, tekhnè, constitute one and the same process. Aristotle thus created all those concepts, on the one hand tekhnè, and in particular thanks to his idea of power which is not at all in his detested master Plato, and alternatively, katharsis, but without realizing that the latter is the same as mimesis. It will be necessary to wait for Lacoue-Labarthe to realize that Hegel’s *Aufhebung* is in fact the katharsis of Aristotle, katharsis as mimesis, as tekhnè, etc. Those are intuitions that Lacoue-Labarthe had had at the end of his life, and all my philosophy is the development of those intuitions. In locating them, I told myself that they touched on something fundamental in the history of philosophy, which is why I try to deploy them, which Lacoue unfortunately did not have time to do. That’s the way philosophy works.

What I’m doing is Hegelianism, that’s what I’m saying right now. I define my system as a disseminated Hegelianism: I take the concept of *Aufhebung* as suppression-conservation, but without resolution in a place and historical progress. And I show how it works in art, in sexuality, etc. In the sense that there is for me a coherence between all that, but a disseminative coherence. There is therefore a solidarity with the Hegelian movement, because all the moments of my thought are inter-related, interacting, but unlike Hegel, this movement becomes more and more disseminated and chaotic; it’s a kind of coherent chaos. But all the same it remains very Hegelian, and any proportion obviously kept elsewhere.

That’s what I said earlier, Philosophy can not not be Platonist. Even when it claims to overthrow Platonism, when it becomes a Platonism of the depths — and that is already the case of the Stoics somewhere, as Deleuze says in *Logic of Sense*. For this depth which is a surface, and
which says “we are going to go with the moles of the cave,” finally, it also proceeds from a philosophy that continues to be a Platonism, even reversed. But beware, Platonism does not mean that we think with the brain of Plato, as Lacan says, it is not a question of anybody or psychology, but rather of the fact that the philosopher can not think without duplication, which is mimesis, techne, representation, and which is immediately there for us human beings; it’s that simple. So we can not escape Platonism. Of course we can always try to deconstruct it, to leave, but in the end we will always stay there, we must not be fooled and naive about that. And besides, it can be said that it was Nietzsche’s ingenious naiveté to believe that one could really get out of it like that, triumphantly. And there have been very good books that notice it, starting with Heidegger saying of Nietzsche’s philosophy that it is an inverted Platonism but that, although overthrown, still remains Platonism.

That’s really what I was saying earlier: you can not escape Platonism because there are always two plans. Existentially, because I know that I fight against it, vituperate against Platonism; basically, it always persists on one side of the empirical level, the little Mehdi who does as he can and who feels rather like a Kafkaesque larva on a daily basis, and on the other hand the fabulous world of thought. And that’s Platonist. Can we do otherwise? No, I do not think so. Even if, as with me, it is a rather negative philosophical world, rather black, which is mainly concerned with evil and what is wrong, the fact remains that, as philosophy, it’s great, it’s exhilarating, it’s much bigger than myself, a little empirical person. And so it remains Platonist. We have no choice, that’s it. From this point of view, Badiou saw it very well. For example, he saw very well that Matrix was an entirely Platonic film. And the other authors [of the Matrix philosophical machine, NDE], like Elie During, saw it very well too: Matrix is the myth of the cave, or, as Chloé Delaume would say, it is the myth of the cave for the guys — she always spoke like that, when she saw the movie The Cube, she said, “Cube is Kafka for goys.” She was funny, that’s why I supported her for so long, because it’s true that there is something that we cannot take away from her, which is that she is funny.

MC: On another note, I’d like to ask you a rather general question about your work on sexuality. This theme runs through your work from the be-
ginning and it is in Being and Sexuation that you systematically integrate it into your philosophy. Can you tell us why the question of sexuation seems to you fundamental in philosophy and, more precisely, how do you think the division between the feminine and the masculine?

MBK: At first the thesis is simple, so much so that it might seem like a gimmick at first glance. I would have decided, a little arbitrarily, that in women, desire and enjoyment would be identical. This idea seems strange, especially from the psychoanalytic point of view, but also beyond. I have read many sexology books, which the intellectual world despises, because of psychoanalysis and Lacan, who has always said that it is an uninteresting science, that it teaches us nothing. But it’s not true statistically, it’s very interesting; for example, the number of women who do not have orgasms — always frightening for male illusions. There is therefore this mystery of jouissance, especially feminine, of which Encore ... speaks a lot. And what is certain is that it is not the same thing as male, i.e. phallic, jouissance, and I think I have found a key to explode many of these mysteries there. So I can talk about it, for example empirically, because when I was explaining it to my girlfriend, and yet we had been dating for over a year, at first she did not really understand, then she understood and told me, Yes, it’s true. And it is always a bit the same reaction when I talk to women: the first hour they are scandalized: “You reduce us to animality,” and even sometimes men: my friend Olivier Zahm, during an interview, wondering if I did not bring woman back to a kind of animality, and yes, I think that we must also go so far to understand the phenomenality of enjoyment, but at the same time not because precisely this animality is the origin from which we have been separated, by technique, language, culture, clothing, etc. But when I talk to women they are ready to cut off my head. In the rest of the discussion, the second hour, the tone changes: “Oh yes, once you explain, etc., I begin to understand what you mean.” Then, in a third moment, “Oh, no, but in fact I always knew it.” And finally, the fourth moment, it’s as if I had never existed, that I had not taught them anything.

At the conference scheduled for three weeks at ENS, there will be a public discussion with my friend Tiphaine Samoyault during which we will talk about it. I chose her because she is a woman who, at one point,
decided to be very feminist. And the discussions that I already had with her were important for the writing of *Being and Sexuation*, she was one of the inspiring ones for that book. It was through those discussions that I was finally convinced of the validity of the hypothesis. And although it seems very simple at first, it is nonetheless very complex in its developments. It covers an important phenomenological dimension which is, in quotation marks, transgressive, as much as it can be today; it’s the opposite of what someone like Marcela Iacub does, that is to say, something purely decorative, glossy paper, on sexual freedom. What I’m saying is that today we have a phenomenological material that is, roughly, adult films, which spread a little everywhere, and which constitute a documentation whose thinking would still be wrong to deprive oneself to discover new things.

MC: *What do you call “pornology”*?

MBK: What I called a little bit awkwardly, and a little bit as an adolescent, a little bit as badly as possible, pornology. It was at the beginning, it is one of those many reckless blunders of the auto-didact. Because it was much later, after having had a bit too much phenomenologically, the idea of pornology, that I found, say, the true concept.

But it’s true that at one point, for example in S&M with the forced orgasm, I wondered why is it always in the case of a female slave that we talk about that? Is it really forced in the sense of rape, of a gang rape, or is it rather a practice, as they say, between consenting adults? Why are women forced to orgasm? Because, quite simply, it does not make sense with a man. As Deleuze has clearly seen in his writings on masochism, it would even, on the contrary, prevent him from enjoying. The masochist will have to prevent himself, as Deleuze says, from making a plan of consistency of desire. Deleuze even goes so far as to say that jouissance is rather unfortunate, that it is rather an accident that interrupts desire. But obviously for women it does not happen in the same way, there is no pleasure in interrupting desire. And no need to refer to trashy things to account for it. I come back to my personal experience. What is remarkable in women is this very great singularization of jouissance, much more than in men. Women are much more different from each other, in their own libido, than men, for whom it seems
relatively more uniform. And, moreover, concerning men, when this is singled out, it is precisely in the sense of what Deleuze called a becoming-woman; it’s a bit queer today, it seems to me.

So, to return to the “mystery” on which Lacan tramples, and of which he complains in *Encore* ..., when he is already 75 years old, and where he says that in all his life he begged women, his psychoanalytic colleagues, to tell him something about feminine enjoyment, but that he could not know anything about either. And I’m sure that on this point, phenomenologically, I found something. But it’s always the same, and that’s also why the book is still unpublished, for the moment every time I tried to have it read by the big guns, they considered me a dodo. This is the somewhat cursed poet’s side of the auto-didact, but I say it with irony because I am convinced that this discovery of the identity of desire and enjoyment touches upon something. To the point that it would be necessary, in a little Derridean mode, to find a trick in language to account for it. That’s what the writer Elfriede Jelinek said in her novels ... I don’t know how to say: porn but not porn, she said that all the language of eroticism was written by men, and therefore that woman can only take back and subvert this language from inside. And although I do not really like Jelinek as a novelist, I must admit that on this matter her point is quite right. Language, for sexuality as for the rest, is a fact of men.

All this to say that one would have to find another word than those of desire and enjoyment, something like desire = jouissance, “désijouissance,” I don’t know. This is where one reaches the limit of language a little bit. And we realize that perhaps this is also why Freud discovers that there is a problem on this side. When he discovers the truth of the unconscious it is not at all in men but rather in women and it is thanks to that that, retroactively, he also discovers a type of specific sexual difference. I realized this by rereading *Five Psychoanalyses*. Thanks to my reading grid, one realizes that Freud’s Dora, at the level of memory, removes and preserves at the same time her traumas, her libido in the most animal sense of the term of an identity of the desire and the enjoyment. That’s what I said on S&M earlier. From a phenomenological point of view, forced orgasm exists only in women because this expression has no meaning for men. Now it is always, here as elsewhere, sup-
pression-conservation, always the Aufhebung. Because I also realize that Freud discovered this difference in the unconscious, and that it is precisely the same story with katharsis. We were talking about Plato from whom we cannot escape, but I prefer Aristotle because he is more down to earth. Rather than the great ideas, the two levels, the sublimation of Plato, with Aristotle, who is not the woman, we are going to say the feminine of Plato, we come down again, it is the tekhnê that produces all the duplications. And so, what is the unconscious if not that which sustains what consciousness has suppressed! It is therefore pure Aufhebung, so it is Hegelian, and therefore Platonist. That’s it, we do not leave it, because it is not a problem related to the French language, it is more directly the fact that for the human being thought is confused with life.

That’s why, and I’m coming back to my main idea, when you read Freud’s psychoanalysis, you notice something incredible. Because at the time sexual difference is simpler to think, it is not as confused as today. I am thinking in particular of the queer of which, as much as I like the movement, I like the thought much less, because for me this discourse which consists in saying that there is only the third sex — as said the great Indochina poet — and that sharing in two sexes is only a male illusion, I find it too grossly deconstructionist. And I do not think that’s the way it should be, for me everything comes down to the basic existence of both sexes. The first psychoanalysts had started from this observation, especially since at that time the era was not queer, it is the least we can say, the men were very masculine, the women very feminine. A woman, when she was about to undergo psychoanalysis, had forgotten everything about her trauma — only her body remembers it. That is what Freud describes in one of his most famous psychoanalyses, that of Dora. It is therefore for her to find little by little this trauma through the symptoms. That is, that the hysterical woman has forgotten everything about her traum; she does not remember that day when she had wandered with her uncle who had touched her in precisely the wrong place, and she subsequently repressed completely, completely foreclosure. All that remains is her body, which has become sick, which she remembers, unlike her conscience; and she remembers it in the form of an emotion, an affect, which persists. So this substance that I call desire-enjoyment
is identical. And the psychoanalytic work on the couch will consist in finding through the symptom the original trauma, to make it return to consciousness. In humans, this time, it’s exactly the opposite. The man always remembers, in detail, the trauma that has happened to him at such a moment; he is a proud, virile man, etc. He, what he repressed, is the affect. That is to say, he is able to describe it to his psychoanalyst, but with coldness. In this sense, it is the exact opposite of the woman. And so for him psychoanalysis will consist in recovering the emotion he experienced at the time of the trauma. It will be a very good sign when he begins to cry on the couch; it will mean that the emotion begins to return, and thereby, he begins to heal. Conversely for the hysteric who will begin to heal when she stops crying.

From what I was saying, then, about the queer controversy, we have to accept sexual difference to talk about displacement, to understand how we go beyond biological identity. For example, when I was a kid, and even after, I was very hysterical, I was very feminine in myself, while I know that biologically I have a male body. But in the anthropological enclosure there is this transcendence of the biological by the singular case. And this overtaking is not a clean slate, it is a deletion-preservation, with perhaps as a limit the transsexual operation, and so on. But let’s stop joking about the queer, because in the end, 99%, when you see a transsexual, you know he’s a transsexual.

MC: *It would be in this way also that you go beyond the classical dichotomy between nature and culture, speaking neither of biological difference, nor third sex, but of masculine “position” and feminine “position.”*

MBK: It’s a whole genealogical inquiry, and that’s what I owe to Lacoue-Labarthe on his reflection about Rousseau. The naturalism of Rousseau, which even today is subject to caricature, if we read well, it is not so clear. The question is not at all a clear distinction between nature and culture. What is interesting is rather that nature, as such, and caricatured so much and more in Rousseau, this originally good nature, in fact he hardly talks about it. What he is talking about, and that is what is much more revolutionary in the history of thought — Kant and Hegel can only draw on the line of this discovery of Rousseau — is the passage. So it is not a question of thinking that there is one side and culture
is the other, that culture is bad and nature is good, and so on. Of course there is that in Rousseau, but what is really interesting is the dialectic of the one to the other. And so, from there, everything we describe, I say in Being and Sexuation, everything comes from Rousseau. Because Rousseau is Plato, he’s Aristotle. One always comments on the Poetics of Aristotle.

DB: On the philosophical question that forces us to ask the psychoanalytic, concerning the status of the unconscious, what is your position? What status do you accord to the unconscious? Do you see it as a black area, or are you trying to mix it with consciousness in another way?

MBK: It’s a huge debate. And for me it’s one of Badiou’s many ambiguities. While on the one hand he does not stop paying tribute to psychoanalysis, on the other he denies the existence of the unconscious. But beyond that, one of the unforgivable things for me with Badiou remains his politics, which is closely related to this issue. And that is where the scandal is, which does not bother any badiouist of the day; it is easy to summarize. In Theory of the Subject Badiou says that the Chinese re-education camps and the psychoanalytic couch are the same thing, that it is the intention that counts, and that there would have just been a failure at one time. Here is the typical Badiou, that is to say, enormities as big as his head, if I dare say, and which nevertheless end up passing by all those people who want to brighten up their routine, who want to show that they read a great philosopher. But in fact they will never have read Badiou in depth. Now he should have learned one thing through psychoanalysis: one can never put oneself in the place of the desire of the other; which, at bottom, is the great ethical lesson of psychoanalysis. But on the contrary, politics according to Badiou is to say that it is possible to want the good of someone in his place. And this politico-ethical dimension of his philosophy is unforgivable to me. He keeps saying “Lacan my master,” and so on, but he will publish Theory of the Subject only after his death. And what would Lacan have thought of the idea that the Chinese re-education camps and the psychoanalytic divan would involve the same process? However, it is always like that with Badiou, for example, he begins to defend Wagner when Lacoue-Labarthe, the great anti-Wagnerian philosopher, is almost on his death-
bed, ditto when he writes that he beat Deleuze, just after his death. And I am not the only one to notice it, nor to have the right to say it in public, because one must well say that Badiou is a great philosopher who will have an influence on the intellectual scene of the future.

The second criticism I would make to Badiou, concerning the question of the unconscious, would be the following. Once, when discussing my Event and Rehearsal, he tells me that he does not need the unconscious in his system, which seems quite incredible for someone who has read Lacan all his life. I only say it now because he had the means to make a great philosophy with this position, he had very heavy artillery, a great total philosophy that speaks of everything. And that’s what made me say to myself that I was wrong, that it was no longer possible. Badiou was the only one who could convince me that it was possible to make great philosophy. But afterwards, when we face it we say that it should not even exist. And I say all this because there is a profound incoherence in claiming a total philosophy that answers almost all questions, but at the price of extremely violent foreclosures.

So, to close the circle, I made this detour by way of Badiou to say that indeed for me the thought of the unconscious is final. I did not engage in psychoanalysis but I should probably do so. I decided that the problem was of a nature that goes beyond the psychoanalytic dimension, that the trauma is not only in this area. But I’m not sure yet, maybe I’m wrong ... I hurt myself at some point, I’m wrong myself, but on the other hand I know I have an unconscious, which by definition is unconscious. I realize it with little tricks: for example, in certain periods, I lose my keys and my bank card three times a week; or recently, I was regularly turning the wrong button on my electric stove, etc., very little things like that. One of my exes kept telling me: “You’re seriously closed off,” because she was undergoing psychoanalysis, she was very interested in it. And she was not wrong to tell me what she did. But I know it, I do not deny the fact that I have an unconscious — and which, by the way, is probably not stung by scatterbrains.

A lot has been said, but it would be a matter of not forgetting it because under the influence of Badiou, who seems to be reluctant to relay hyper-positivist, pseudo-exhaustive, super-overhanging, subsuming

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7 Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Event and Rehearsal (Tristram, 2004).
thoughts, etc.; that with Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, it was definitive, that something had broken out. Or with Derrida and dissemination, that we can not return to this act; there is the unconscious, both individual and collective, and there is no God to collect every unconscious there. And that’s the difference between Bergson and Freud; it is for this reason that Bergson can be recovered by religion. The most caricatural way in which this recovery was done is with Teilhard de Chardin. Because with Bergson there is the theme of total memory. And that’s really what I never understood, and that’s also why I’m not Deleuzien.

MC: It’s a position you’ve been holding since the beginning. Already in Pop Philosophy, and even before, you criticize Deleuze through this Bergsonian idea of total memory.

MBK: I wrote a text, it is in Being and Sexuation, where I explain myself about the design of the event in Deleuze. I wrote it for this reason, on the theme of total memory. And these are also things that I write right now: there is a total memory called technology. Today, with technology, this is the first time in the history of humanity where we realize what we have always dreamed: God, Total Memory, there is an entity, but an entity without consciousness, a total memory without consciousness. To the point that at this moment I push the thing, and despair goes so far: God = Technology.

But I work a lot on this problem in the very Hegelo-Kojevian mode, that is to say on what we thought God was when in fact it’s the work, in fact it’s the technique. As St. Paul would say, “sum all the workers of God,” but it must be understood literally. “We are all God’s workers” means first of all that we are workers, in short. We work, unlike animals. And in Hegelo-Kojevian mode, it is the work that makes humanity, so the negative in the work, the work as negative. But in the meantime, that is to say, in the post-Hegelo-Kojevian mode, the problem has shifted toward technology, which ends up giving an entity which, it may be said, will soon be likely to be mistaken, to the realization, which obviously was not at all planned, of immortality. Thanks to biogenetics and total memory we can make everything storable, store everything, etc.

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8 Belhaj Kacem et P. Nassif, Pop Philosophie. Entretiens (Denoël, 2005).
But simply this storage of total memory, no finite human being can enjoy it. It is only technology, which has no consciousness, that can have an actually total memory.

MC: What do you mean it would be a sort of virtualized technique, the virtual Deleuzian become technical?

MBK: Yes, and that’s what I never understood with Deleuze. The theme that he inherits from Bergson of the total memory, even though in the *Abécédaire* he says, “but I forget all the time ...” And maybe it’s a bit like the luxury of the self-taught, sometimes to say that the king is naked ... Because this is also part of the philosophical thematic. It’s a bit Kant against Bergson, that is to say that there is total memory, but we have no full subjective access. And I think it’s a pretty mystical idea because Teilhard de Chardin, whom we often make fun of, really understood this thing in Bergson, that indeed the total memory could only be God.

But for my part, I only believe in what I see and today I discern that it is possible, for the first time in the history of humanity, to store everything, to film everything, etc. so that one is obliged to do archeology to roughly guess how pre-historical men, the Greeks, the Romans, have lived and so on, without being able to know what they really looked like (we can only guess with drawings), as much, conversely, future generations will really know the figures of our time, if, obviously, we have not destroyed ourselves beforehand. We will have almost everything available: what did we look like physically, what were our automations, etc.? There is a record that I like very much, which is called *Musiques de la Grèce ancienne*, but necessarily they are only reconstructions because we do not really know what ancient music looked like. In reality, there is no way to know exactly the music of the 14th century. This is perhaps one of the singularities of music compared to other arts, even if, indeed, it is also the case for mural painting (although there are still things preserved in Pompeii). But overall we can say that music has this particularity, which perhaps explains the fact that it is a very particular area for philosophy. So, as I said, for the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries we can not really reconstruct, it is with the 14th century, that is to say with the birth of the score, musical writing, that the sound memory is preserved and that today we can know exactly how to play the music. This makes
it possible, for example, to reconstruct the great artist of the 14th century, Guillaume Machaud: a monk who was the greatest musician and the greatest poet of his time (Baudelaire and Wagner in one); it was an extraordinary, extremely sophisticated music and gallantry. Sublime love poems on the part of a monk, both from the point of view of man and from the point of view of the woman; it’s heartbreaking.

MC: On the relationship between memory and technology, are you reading the last things around Bernard Stiegler? I think of him because this material retention of memory he calls tertiary retention seems pretty close to what you say.

MBK: Absolutely. I delayed my reading of Stiegler but it’s true that when I started to read him, and although I have to deepen it further, I saw something interesting. Besides, it is planned that we do an interview together. He could not come to the symposium of the ENS, but suddenly this interview should appear in the book of proceedings. It is clear that since the death of Lacoue-Labarthe he is the only philosopher in activity whose themes are quite close to mine. That’s probably why I avoided him, it’s always a bit like that. Because in the same way, I think it’s also why I did not read Lacoue-Labarthe when he was still alive. I started reading him when he was dying. Maybe unconsciously I knew there would be a rapprochement right away.

MC: And to stay in very contemporary philosophy, in metaphysics, there are several authors that we have not yet addressed and who are part of your privileged interlocutors, I think Tristan Garcia and Quentin Meillassoux, especially concerning the thematic of non-existence, that corresponds to your current work.

MBK: I have a lot of admiration for what Tristan says, and for his book [NDE: Shape and Object, PUF, 2011]. I think it will be discussed in three weeks, even if in the end his philosophy is very far from me. For Meillassoux it’s completely different. It’s an approach totally different from mine, but there is a theme that brings us closer. It is planned that I write a book on him. With Tristan there is still a point where we can meet. Precisely, in his metaphysics, say his own or that of Graham Harman, those metaphysics of which the human being is completely absent seem
to me very closely related to the epoch of today: very naively and numbly nevertheless, as if by chance it is at the beginning of the 21st century, when man can really disappear, that this metaphysics of outside man is thought.

But for Meillassoux it’s a bit the same, there’s a theme for him that one has to believe in God precisely because he does not exist, and that it would be rational for a miracle to happen, for a God to come, or the world of immortality. But I told him: would not God already be technology? Is immortality not already before our eyes? Why would a God come down and make us immortal when we are already technologically making immortality? And it’s the same as with Badiou and those great metaphysical maximizations that I think a modern philosopher must ask them: finally, is immortality so desirable? I just re-read Maurice Blanchot’s The Instant of My Death, in which he says: “The happiness of being neither eternal nor immortal.” And nothing but a sentence like that, because it implies Blanchot’s whole, makes me think much more than do the sophisticated metaphysical clichés of Badiou on eternal truth, on immortality, and so on. At one point Meillassoux makes fun of the probably post-Heideggerian philosophers who say “yes, but if we were not mortal, there would be no affect.” But the question is not to die or not to die, the question is: is it true or is it false? Would not immortality risk suppressing affect?

MC: *It is also one of the main criticisms that you make of Badiou when you say that through his obsession with eternity he ends up forgetting life.*

MBK: Yes, these are metaphysical biases that ultimately involve tearing the event out of life and returning it to the stars. And basically what I want to say to them is: “Why the hell do I give a fuck about the stars?” I prefer life! That’s all.
TM: To finish, a very broad question but perhaps calling for a heading, a horizon for a future philosophy: in relation to your work, what would be the contemporary metaphysical stakes for the decades to come?

MBK: Broad question. For me it could be precisely by taking paths totally different from Meillassoux, especially this thing of a God to come that I criticize in my book. But sometimes I want to say: after all, do what you want, it is perhaps not bad this story of a non-existent God. For example, I talk to artists: why not write, create, for a God who does not exist, it would not be bad. In any case it would be something other than Christianity, and it will leave us a little postmodern nihilism, so why not. I’m critical of that, but it’s true that when I reread Meillassoux I think he’s a great philosopher. But I just think he’s the one who’s sick of his own discovery and that’s why he’s not published for 20 years. In the end, Meillassoux has only one chance of succeeding, in the end really, he must take his responsibilities: he can only give a Church of a new kind, the church of the non-existent God. But why not!

Lastly, I think that the important question is that of the trilogy: philosophy-religion-science. It’s really the subject of Meillassoux, it’s really mine, and even if you do it completely differently, I think it is necessary to linger and settle on. To summarize very very grossly I will say that for me that’s it. The coming century will really have to settle this question, for me it is the center: how to articulate philosophy, science, and religion. What’s left of it, but there’s still a lot left.
EMIL CIORAN
THE KEY TO THE ABYSS

Caspar David Freidrich, *The Wreck of Hope* (1823–24). Oil on canvas, 3’2”x4’2.”

Translated by Rainer Hanshe

From *L'Apocalypse*, imaginé et réalisé par Joseph Foret (1961)
However severe we are in regard to this century, however serious the shortcomings may appear, one cannot, however unjustifiably, refuse it the merit of knowing itself, and of wanting itself to be condemned. This merit, this privilege rather, assures it a unique physiognomy and gives the fatality that awaits it an irresistible attraction. Happy and unhappy to live there, we contemplate with voluptuarity and terror the signs that define and distinguish it. Other centuries also knew the curiosity of the outcome, the impatience of the imminent and the intolerable, the pangs of a dreaded and expected certainty, with this difference, however, that it was open to them to conceive an after, a day after a disaster, an end followed by a judgment, a hope of compromise or fraud. For us, the irreparable model of completion, is flawless; it is even the only form of rigor and perfection that we can imagine. Consequently, indistinct of our future, it draws us, with its irreprouachable tenebrosity, as wonderfully apt to approach it, the more we fall into this flattering nightmare, felt by all those who had the advantage of finding themselves at the heart of some great calamity.

The symmetry of our days, the order which reigns there, the regularity which makes it a pleasant monotony, one does not have to think about it long to detect its precariousness. The cosmos is just a habit, a routine matter, a prejudice. Appearance excavated or hollowed out, we can easily see that it concealed chaos, the principle of becoming, and the foundation of the world. And this chaos, there is no need to discover it, to tackle its appearances, to explore its undersides; it is enough for us, once our simulacra have been discarded, to descend into ourselves, to observe an immoderate mess, related to the one from which the universe was born, and, even more, of the one it's going toward. Our balance comes down to a conquest of which we are not always aware, to a fight against our depths, to a continual challenge to our chasms. And it is in order not to fall into it and to disappear there that we hold on to our dogmas or develop our systems, pretexts intended to divert us from our depth, from the confusion that unfolds there, which rages there. No, the cosmos is not even a prejudice; it's a fiction or, well, a misunderstanding. The “real” resides elsewhere, in the formless, in the whirlwind which enmeshes worlds in this vertigo, consubstantial with matter, which disorganizes our certainties and consolidates our
fear. No support, no matter where we look. If only we knew before whom to tremble! Our solitude is without remedy, the sky depopulated, and the gods, unconscious, no longer come to take care of us, either to assist us or to mistreat us. We were made to assent or to quarrel with them, to celebrate or to execrate them, to beg them or to hate them. Now that they have withdrawn, humility and lament have no more purpose. Who to worship, who to curse? We like our terrors to proceed from above, that they are “noble” and, at the very least, intolerable, provided that they redeem us in our own eyes and correspond to the image of ourselves that we have soothingly forged for ourselves. The ancient world, at its decline, also experienced the emptiness following the desertion or the exhaustion of the gods; but it could easily obtain others, the Orient having preserved its own with the ulterior motive of exporting them one day. It is not the same for us, who no longer have gods in reserve anywhere, because, to occupy their place, we have striven to dislodge them from heaven and earth. And we have succeeded beyond our expectations, even beyond those of the serpent, of which only today we were given to listen and follow the advice for good. As we keep moving away from our primitive innocence (every moment strikes a blow to paradise and to the memory of paradise), there will come a time when, completely impure and corrupt, and too ripe for hell, we will not even be able to expect damnation, the non-negligible tranquility of the reprobates. We do not extend anything to man, as did his delusions, if we miss this evidence where his destinies are summed up: everything he has stolen from the gods turns against him. Their despotism crushed him, he claimed; he wanted to become a despot like them, he got there, and now he’s bowing under his own tyranny. Embarrassed by their pride, he endeavored to eclipse them, to humiliate them by demonstrations of a pride greater than theirs, by an arrogance from which he suffers because he is its slave, and of which he could not undo without abdicating and denying himself. Like them too, aspiring to ubiquity, he converted, by his own authority, into the absolute. He is everywhere, it is a fact, but in the manner of a universal specter, omnipresence of nowhere, infinite without properties, invasive and aggressive nothingness, all the more tormented in that having abolished transcendence, who has he more against to recriminate if not himself, rightly so since the rest of
his vocation, ceasing to be regulated by higher powers, stars or
divinities, he bears sole responsibility for a destiny that however
escapes him. So, after dispensing with the gods so that he no longer
had to fear them, he ended up becoming the object of his own panics.
As he reflects upon himself, he becomes the victim of an
irrepressible malaise. Wherever he directs his gaze, he perceives the
trace of his misconduct and his infamy, the stigmas of his insanity,
and the more he flees and flees, the more he falls on his face and
collides with his derision. And we who are lamenting that we no
longer know before whom to tremble, we are overwhelmed: man
comes before our panics, to flesh them out, to lend them content and
meaning, to make them inexhaustible and to justify them forever.
From now on, we will no longer be able to consider them without
shuddering. These very fears increase ours. At a time when he
inspired only astonishment or some vague perplexity, no one could
have imagined that one day he would become a subject of terror.
After strangling and crushing the gods, what did he resolve to do but
to rest and vegetate next to their corpses! It was written that he
would continue to be agitated, that he would push the obsession
with going beyond to mania, until this greed for ruin, always
renewed, never satisfied, which commands respect, intimidates us
and leaves us undecided between fascination and weariness. Would
he, that he could do nothing to evade his ruin; the principle of his
loss being confused with his very being, to try to eradicate it would
be for him to lose himself completely, so that he would risk much
more in seeking his salvation than in opting for the inevitable.
Embarked on a path he neither wants nor can leave, he fulfills the
ideal conditions for a tragic destiny and an exemplary defeat. If all
the gods he killed were resuscitated and wanted, in a fit of truly
divine generosity, to rescue him, they wouldn’t, no more than would
all the mute creatures, suddenly promoted to speech by the violence
of pity, by the need to pray for him.

Even if he had been an animal like the others, he would have
been able to nurture the hope of an insensitive path, of a comfortable
slide toward death. The fear of a slow extinction, which creates the
pleasure and the sweetness of decrepitude, fate refused it to him;
and he will not even be able, as compensation, to bet on a
catastrophe which has occurred independently of his whims, his
wills, and his calculations. With his own rhythm, opposed to that of nature, which is reluctant to precipitation and to frenzy, he had to conceive — in feverish abortion, which can not wait — a real horror of growth; and this horror is what causes him in all his endeavors to expend an energy disproportionate to his strength. At the paroxysm of a duration that is consumed and devoured, always alongside or beyond the immediate, he never lives to live; it's that life is less a reality than a gift, which he has neither known nor wanted to cultivate, and there is no man, that is to say life inflected toward non-life, except by this incapacity or this refusal. Unfit to stay put, a stranger to the charm of stagnation or of serenity, after flying to a hell which he no longer deigns to fear, the fire which burns him and which he perpetuates at his expense, he went, through the intermediary of history, incessant combustion of moments, taking over from the infernal powers and providing Satan with endless leisure. And if everything that he stole from the gods turned against him, all the more reason should he stand up to crush them for what he stole from the demons; he had to rob them so as not to have to share with them the empire of the world of which he wanted to be the sole and unique master. His mistake was to believe that his reign was erected with impunity on the ruin of heaven and earth. A fatal error, less, however, than that of having chosen models out of proportion with what he is and what he is worth. Unable to confine himself within his own limits, in the evidence of his nullity, before what would he stop, and who could incite him to moderation, when he exceeds in magnificence the gods and the demons? Taught, like all crazy people, about the brevity of his career, he intends to give free rein to his extravagances during the short interval which separates him from his end. The fact of approaching it, far from calming and assuaging him, on the contrary, heightens his appetites, lends his race this double character of fatality and thirst, suitable for defining his condition of impetuous agonizing, of frantic and indomitable perishing.

The turn that the human adventure has taken justifies all apprehensions. Not to feel or discern what announces the effervescence of the century is to display a morbid or laughable naivety. Everything points to the breaking up of history, as we have known it; it will dissolve, and with it, the being to whose detriment it
was constructed; it was resting within itself, history dragged it out and associated it with its own convulsions over time; it also represents the ground where it did not cease declining and depreciating, and where it was revealed to itself only to note its degradation, corruption, and defilement. That drama which was to reflect on history from the beginning, how could it not mark it now that history is nearing its end? There is around us the commotion of a last act which, we must admit, is anything but disagreeable to us; how we resemble the early Christians, great devotees of the worst. To their profound disappointment, the worst did not occur, despite the very specific assurances given to them by the many Apocalypses developed at the time and constituted of literary genres. The more these texts multiplied as if to coerce God and force his hand, the more he, impeded by his scruples, inclined to indecision and procrastination. In complete disarray, the faithful had to face the facts: the new advent would not occur; the parousia was postponed; no salvation, no damnation on the horizon. In such conditions, what remained for them to do, if not wait, pinioned between resignation and hope, for better times, the end times? Better endowed than they, we have it, we, our end, it is within our reach, and, to precipitate its arrival, we need not aid from above. A chance as unexpected, for sinister as we are, it is doubtful, this time, that we will not benefit from it. How did we get here? By what process, after so many reassuring centuries, do we suddenly see ourselves before a reality that permits only irony or fright? Since the Renaissance, humanity has made considerable efforts to forget the ultimate meaning of its destinies, the principle of death manifest within it. The Age of Enlightenment, in particular, was to make an important contribution to this endeavor of obsession which ended in the idolatry of Progress. Evolution came, in the following century, to confirm the illusions of the previous. What will it do in a time as foolish as ours? We see it stubbornly displaying its prestige and its promises before us, however rare are those who still believe in them. Not that it lacks a certain vitality; the opposite is true; but we are forced to minimize it, to disdain it — out of prudence and fear. It is because we now know that Progress is compatible with destruction, that it even leads to it, or, at the very least, that it generates, with equal dexterity, prosperity and unhappiness. Any theory, any new discovery
especially, pushing us a little deeper into the incurable, what do we still have in common with the “enlightened” breed, with the maniacs of the Future? Newton’s contemporaries were astonished that a mind of his caliber would deign to comment on the visions of Saint John. Contrarily, for us it would be incomprehensible not to do it, and the scientist who would find it repugnant would attract our contempt. Besides, he doesn’t even need to read the Apocalypse and dwell on it; he saw it in his own way, and prepares a new version of it, more convincing and more effective than the old one, for it is stripped of pomp and poetry. By dint of working on it and perfecting it, he distinguishes its contours and magnitude so clearly that he finds it somewhat embarrassing to discuss. The End Times seem to him a commonplace; what is strange in his eyes is not that it is conceivable and possible, but that it is slow to occur. He is doing his best to complete it, to hasten the irruption: how is he guilty if it hesitates, if it procrastinates? No less impatient, we too would like for it to free us from this curiosity that oppresses us. According to our humors, we advance or postpone the date, however, breathing according to the unbreathable, expanding in what suffocates us, we already participate, through all of our thoughts, however luminous they are, in the night in which they will capsize.

Perhaps it is near, the day when, unable to abide that mass of fear we have accumulated, we shall collapse under the weight with which it overwhelms us. This time the fire of heaven will be our fire, and, to escape it, we will rush to the depths of the earth, far from a world we ourselves have disfigured, despoiled, devastated. And we will dwell below the dead, and we will envy their repose and their beatitude, those carefree skulls, forever empty, those pacified and modest skeletons, finally divested of the impertinences of the blood and the demands of the flesh. Crawling in the dark, we will at least know the happiness of no longer having to confront one another, the happiness of losing our faces. Exposed to the same tribulations and the same dangers, we shall all be the same, yet more strangers to each other than we ever were.

To escape our fate, what is the good of striving for that? Not that we have to despair of finding a substitute ending. It would still have to be likely, have some chance of being realized. Man being what he is, how to admit that he might be given the chance to die in the
serenity of deterioration, amidst the benefits of caducité? Doubtless he is already staggering under the burden of the centuries, yet it seems highly unlikely that he will be up to bearing the weight until the end, till the exhaustion of his strength. On the contrary, everything suggests that the luxury of senility will be forbidden him, if only because of the rhythm by which he lives, his inclination for excess, and that nothingness of geniality which imprints his destiny. Infused with his singularity, infatuated by his gifts, he flouts nature, upsets the economy, creates a disorder close to a nightmare. The spectacle he offers has something irritating and painful about it. That it ends as soon as possible, this is the wish that nature forms, and that man, if he wanted to, could grant immediately. Thus nature would be delivered of these seditious creatures whose very smile is subversive, of this contra-living which she forcibly shelters, of this usurper who stole her secrets so as to subjugate and dishonor her. In turn man had to fall into slavery and ignominy by his excesses and the forfeits of his knowledge and his power. Having exceeded, as much by his knowledge as by his actions, the limits assigned to the creature, he attacked the very sources of his being, his original nature. His conquests are the facts of a traitor to life, as his remorse, which he tries to conceal by insolence and agitation. If he gets drunk on noise, if he catches fire for the deafening wonders of technique, it is to enact vertigo and evade himself, to evade the indictment that the slightest self-reflection would make explode in his face. Creation rested in a sacred stupor, in an admirable and inaudible groan that arouses the neighborhood of eternity. Shaking it up by his frenzy, his vociferations of a hunted monster, he made it unrecognizable, he projected his rages and his trances, and forever compromised his peace. As the tumult takes hold, comes into vogue and turns into a crash, the prerogative soul of an intimate world falls into disuse, he disappears and abdicates. The disappearance of silence must be counted among the signs announcing the end. It is no longer because of its immodesty or its debauchery that today's Babylon the great merits collapsing, but because of its racket and its din, the stridency of its scrap metal and the madmen who can't get enough of it. Relentless against the solitary, those modern martyrs, she pursues and tortures them, interrupting their mediations at every moment, seeping like a noisy virus into their thoughts to undermine them, to
disintegrate them. How, in their exasperation, could they not want to see her collapse without delay? She invades space, this new prostitute, contaminates beings and landscapes, drives out purity and meditation everywhere. Where to go, where to remain? And what else to seek in the clamor of a Babylonian planet? Before it shatters, those who have suffered the most, those she has assiduously tormented, will finally have their revenge: they will be the only ones to await the outcome without tension or panic, the only ones able to appreciate and savor this suspension of the din, this brief and decisive silence that precedes the great catastrophes.

The more power man acquires, the more vulnerable he becomes. What he must fear most is the moment when, creation completely curbed, he will celebrate his triumph, that fatal apotheosis, the victory that he will not survive. Most likely, he will disappear before having realized all his ambitions and dreams. He is so powerful already that we wonder why he aspires to be more so. So much insatiability betrays a misery without recourse, an essential decline. Plants and beasts bear the marks of salvation, as man does those of perdition. This is true of each of us, of the entire species, dazzled and decimated by the brilliance of the irremediable. It perpetuates its destinies across the nations, sworn to bondage by the simple automatism of becoming. All together, they are basically just so many detours that history borrows to lead to the establishment of a universal tyranny, an empire that will encompass the continents. No more borders, no more… therefore no more freedom and no more illusions. It is significant that the Apocalypse was conceived at a time when all men, and even the gods, had to bow before the good pleasure of Rome. The arbitrary degenerated into terror, the oppressed had only the hope of one day being freed from it by an event of cosmic dimensions, the appearance and even details of which they began to imagine. In the empire to come, the disinherited will do the same; the apocalyptic genus will supplant for them all other genera; but, contrary to the primitive Christians, they will not hate the new Nero, or rather, they will hate themselves in him, they will shroud themselves in the execration that they will dedicate to him, they will make of him a hated ideal, the first of the damned, none of them having the shame of being elected.
No new sky, no new earth, no new angel to open the "pit of the abyss." Do we not have the key to it ourselves? The abyss is in ourselves and outside ourselves; it is yesterday's presentiment, today's interrogation, and tomorrow's certainty. The establishment, like the dislocation, of the future empire will take place in the midst of convulsions without past analogies. At the stage of history we have reached, even when we want to, it would be impossible for us to amend ourselves, and, in a fit of wisdom, to reconsider our fate and retrace our steps. So great, so virulent is our perversity, that instead of attenuating it, our reflections on it, as our efforts to overcome it, strengthen and aggravate it. On what recourse to count, when lucidity itself accentuates and reinforces our decline? Predestined to shipwreck, man represents, in the drama of creation, the most spectacular and the most pitiful episode. As the evil that lay dormant in creatures awakened in him, it was up to us to destroy ourselves so that they might be saved. The possibilities of consciousness, the cleaving and conflicting virtualities that they contained, became actualized in us, and it is at our own expense that we liberated plants and beasts from the fatal elements that lay dormant within them. An act of generosity, a sacrifice to which we consented, seemingly, only to regret it, and to become embittered. Jealous of their unconsciousness, the foundation of their salvation, we would like to be like them and, furious at our inability to do so, we meditate on their ruin, we try to interest them in our misfortunes so as to take it out on them. It is the animals we resent most: what would we not give to strip them of their silence, to convert them to language, to inflict upon them the calamity of speech! We worked there with a cruelty worthy of our reputation. The charm of a carefree life, of naive existence being forbidden to us, we could not tolerate that others enjoy it. Deserters of paradise, we are inexorable with anyone who still lives there, against all beings that, indifferent to our adventure, bask in their blissful torpor. And the gods, have we not fiercely repudiated them, outraged to see that they were conscious without suffering from it, while for us consciousness and misfortune constitute a tragic synonymy? If we have penetrated the secret of their power, we have not been able to unveil that of their bliss. Vengeance was inevitable: how to forgive them for possessing knowledge without incurring its inherent curse? Once they
disappeared, we did not renounce the quest for happiness; we carry it and always search for it in precisely what distances it from us, in the conjunction of knowledge and power. The more these two terms come together to the point of merging, the more the vestiges that we kept of our primitive innocence, of our origins, are erased. The eternity where we were at home, as soon as we were deprived of it, as soon as we betrayed it rather, we rushed and engulfed ourselves in time, without the possibility of tearing ourselves free of it or of recovering our true homeland. If time has corrupted us, we in turn have corrupted time; from this reciprocal degradation would result that challenge to eternity which is history, a challenge coextensive with centuries and as exhausted as we are. What we experience in spirit at Patmos, we will in fact see one day, we will distinctly perceive this sun “black as a horsehair sack,” that moon of blood, those stars falling like figs, that sun withdrawing “like a scroll that is rolled back within itself.” Our anxiety echoes that of the Seer, whom we are closer to than were our predecessors, including those who wrote about him, particularly the author of the *Origins of Christianity*, who had the imprudence to assert: “We know that the end of the world is not so near as the enlightened people of the first century supposed, and that this end will not be a sudden catastrophe. It will take place in the cold, in thousands of centuries...” The semi-literate Evangelist had a better glimpse of our destinies than his learned commentator, a skeptic subservient to modern superstitions. No wonder: as we return to ancient times, we encounter anxieties similar to our own. Philosophy, at its beginnings, had, better than the presentiment, the exact intuition of the completion and the conclusion of becoming. Heraclitus, our ideal contemporary, already knew that fire will “judge” everything; he even went further: — he envisaged a general conflagration at the end of each cosmic period, a sort of repeating apocalypse, correlated to any cyclical conception of time. Less daring and less demanding, we are content with a *single* end, lacking the vigor that would allow us to conceive of several, and to endure them above all. We admit, it is true, a plurality of civilizations, so many worlds that are born and die; but who among us would consent to the indefinite resumption of history in its totality? With each event that occurs, and which seems necessarily irreversible, we advance one step further toward a single
outcome, according to the rhythm of progress of which, should we say? we adopt the schema and refuse the nonsense. We are progressing, yes, we are even galloping, toward a specific disaster, and not toward some lustrous perfection. The greater our repugnance for the chimeras of our immediate predecessors, the closer we feel to the Orphics, who placed Night at the origin of things, or to an Empedocles, who conferred upon Hatred cosmogonic virtues. But it is still with the philosopher of Ephesus that we agree best, when he assures us that the universe is governed by lightning. Reason no longer blinding us, we finally discover the other side of the world, the essential tenebrity that resides there, and if there must be a light that will turn us from it, it will be, no doubt, that of some fatal fulguration. Another trait that brings us closer to the pre-Socratics is the passion for the ineluctable, which they conceived at the dawn of our civilization, at the first contact with the elements and the beings whose spectacle must have plunged them into bewildered amazement. At the end of the ages, when we have arrived, we see it, us, as the only way to reconcile ourselves with man, with the horror he inspires in us. Resigned or bewitched, we watch man run toward what denies him, tremble in the ecstasy of his annihilation. Panic — his vice, his reason for being, the principle of his expansion, of his unhealthy prosperity — has so firmly possessed him, defined him so intimately, that he would collapse instantly were it to be taken from him. If he had to renounce technical acquisitions, all the means at his disposal to multiply the dangers which threaten him, it would precipitate him still, by the revolution which it started in him, toward the irreparable, toward an undoubtedly simplified and naked irreparable, even disappointing, yet real, despite its lack of scale and pomp. As subtle as the first philosophers were, they could not divine that the moral universe would propose problems as insoluble and as terrifying as the physical universe: man, at the time when they lived, had not yet made his proofs... The advantage we have over them is to know of what he is capable, or, more precisely, of what we ourselves are capable. For that stimulating and destructive panic, we all carry it within us, it is marked upon our faces, explodes in our gestures, traverses our bones and seethes in our blood. Our contortions, visible or secret, we communicate to the planet; already it trembles just as we do, it undergoes the contagion
of our crises, and, as this high evil transmitted, it vomits us forth, curses us all the while.

It is undoubtedly distressing that we must confront the final phase of the historical process at the moment when, having liquidated our old beliefs, we lack metaphysical receptivity, any substantial reserves of the absolute. Surprised by death throes, dispossessed of everything, we evade the definitive and the inexorable. If, with the courage to countenance things directly, we had the power to suspend our course, if only for a moment, this respite, this pause on a global scale, would suffice to reveal to us the extent of the precipice which awaits us, and the resulting dread would quickly be converted into prayers or lamentations, into a salutary howl. But we cannot stop, we cannot save ourselves. And if the notion of destiny seduces and sustains us, it is because it contains, despite everything, a metaphysical residue, and that it represents the only glimpse we have of a semblance of the absolute, without which nothing can subsist. One day, who knows? this very remedy could fail us. At the height of our emptiness, we would be doomed then to the indignity of total usury, worse than a sudden, honorable, and even prestigious, disaster. Let us be confident, let us bet on the catastrophe, more in line with our genius and our capacities. Let us take it a step further, assume it has happened, treat it as a \textit{fait accompli}. In all likelihood, it will include survivors, a privileged few who will have had the pleasure of watching the spectacle and learning from it. Their first concern will most certainly be to abolish the memory of ancient humanity, of all the enterprises that discredited and destroyed it. Turning against the cities, against what remains, they will want to complete their ruin, to erode all traces of them. A rachitic tree will be worth more to them than a museum or a cathedral. No more schools; alternatively, courses in oblivion and unlearning to celebrate the virtues of inattention and the delights of amnesia. The disgust spired by the sight of any book, frivolous or serious, will spread to all of the Sciences and Letters, which will be spoken of with embarrassment or fright, as if it were an obscenity or a plague. Indulging in philosophy, developing a system, committing to it and believing in it, will appear as impiety, provocation and betrayal, as a criminal complicity with the past. The tools, all loathed, will be used by no one, except to sweep away the
debris of the collapsed world. Everyone will try to model themselves upon plants, to the detriment of beasts, which will be reproached for evoking in certain ways the figure or the exploits of man; for the same reason, we will refrain from resuscitating the gods, much less the idols. So radical will be the refusal of history, that it will be condemned all together, without mercy, without nuance. Thus will it be with time, identified with a faux pas of the absolute, with an oversight or an aberration of eternity.

Recovering from the fever and delirium of action, the survivors, turning to monotony and stagnation, will endeavor to savor it, to wallow there, so as to evade the urges of becoming and the prestige of the new. Each morning, composed, discreet, they will whisper anathemas against the previous generations, those responsible for the disaster; but, between themselves, no suspicious or sordid feeling, no bitterness or desire to humiliate or to eclipse anyone. Free and equal, they will nonetheless set above themselves anyone who, in his life or in his thought, retains none of the vices of engulfed humanity. All will venerate him and know not peace until they resemble him.

Let's cut short our ravings, for there is no point in inventing a "consoling interlude": a wearisome process of apocalyptic exercises. Not that we have no right to imagine this new humanity, transfigured out of our horrors; who tells us, however, that, having reached its goal, it would not fall back into the miseries of the old? and how to believe that it would not tire of happiness or that it would escape the seduction of the disaster, the temptation to have, itself, too, a destiny? Boredom in the midst of paradise gave birth in our first ancestor an appetite for the abyss which has brought us this procession of centuries of which we now see the end. That appetite, a true nostalgia for hell, would not fail to torment and ravage the race that would succeed us, and to make it the worthy heir of our misfortunes. Let us therefore renounce the prophecies, those frenzied hypotheses, let us stop being fooled by the image of a remote and improbable future, let us wisely abide our century, our certainties, our undoubted abysses.

E.M. CIORAN.
POSTULATES & APOSTASIES
From Ivan Schiavone, *Tavole e stanze (Tables and Stanzas)*¹
(Naples: Oèdipus, 2019)

Translated by Dominic Siracusa & Gianluca Rizzo

¹ The original Italian plays on the ambiguity of the two terms: "tavola" is both, a "table," in the sense of a piece of furniture, and an "illustration," a "figure" in a publication; "stanza" is both a section of a poem, as in English, but the term feels somewhat archaic in contemporary Italian, and "room."
Author’s Note

Streams of entities and events, defined by heterogeneous imaginations — both from geographical and historical perspectives — crisscross nearly all the environments in which we live — anthropic, natural, or virtual. The very languages we speak, our truly primary environments, are a collective product shaped by diachronic and synchronic forces. Fragments taken from the most disparate sources coexist and hybridize in the polyphony of our material and spiritual cultures. These warps and wefts, spun in every place around the world, intertwine, giving life to our specific, individual existences. Our identities are no longer determined a priori, by their original contexts, but instead open up to an infinite game of possibilities and metamorphoses. This new law of being can provoke feelings of exaltation or confusion. In this post-identity condition, the definition of the self constantly falls under the responsibility of individuals, and depends upon their ability to prove themselves through a series of reinventions within the community. Notwithstanding the challenges that the contemporary world imposes on each of us, the task of writing can only be that of representing this creole and multi-perspective reality, mimicking its characteristics as it surveys it, always keeping in mind the quantic rule according to which observers modify the observed, cartographers modify the world they seek to represent, language modifies the reality it names. Hence, these tables and stanzas: an atlas for a reality and its collator, a cartography of relations and interferences, poetry.

Bio-Note

everything tangled and bound with everything else, from the machine’s lust for [inertia
to the rotations along the ellipticals, moved and rapt by a single law
the infinitesimal and the infinite, animated by a pulse, a breath
the howling manifested in the call of a beast, in the language that traces
a perimeter in which our psyche builds, screen against reality, the world
feeble lantern for scrawny light against the vast vaults of the night

*

the first writing, the track left in the snow, the sand, the mud
the forgetful surface of the waters, the alternating cadence of the gaits
out of necessity or instinct, the first rhythm under the exact number of the solstice
the black from the combustion of bones, the red from oxide and rust
through dejections the image of the world is rewritten at every season and latitude
faiths and apostasies as trimmings on the grin of an ape already armed for space

*

the word channels an absence, the eco and the ghost of what was once present
reduced to distance for us, extinguished in grief, sacrificed to language
it channels a denial, the forbidden pleasure of naming the essence
appeased by an onanism focused on the game of reconfigurations
in the mirage of totality, it channels its being reflected, when grabbed,
disappears or unravels at the intercourse in which we drown prowling

*

all we can do is retreat into imagination and dwell therein
for the contemplation of all that is closest to us would annihilate us
all we know of reality is the links and margins of our language
where truths entities and events exclusively happen, and the world
the absolute availability, is a footprint on which man while naming treads
as a stranger in his own home from which language does not hide but steals²

² In this verse, Schiavone upends the popular Italian expression “La casa nasconde ma non ruba” (The house hides but doesn’t steal), substituting “language” for the “house”; one also perceives a veiled reference to Heidegger’s “Poetically Man Dwells.”
Plane Song

*to you who came as light in so much night*
*beacon while adrift, course*

only to hide my dwelling which your gaze revealed
stillness itself vibrated, in resonance, and there was light, was, from cosmos to [atom]
the law which governs the perfect mechanics of reality, it was splendor
only to make our center into a binary star, our foci and orbit

*already standing in brief day, weighed by shade, that doesn’t retreat or clear the [star,]
and cold
as an unripe stone buried in the heart of the hills waiting for someone to bring it to [light]
I awaited your coming and like grass, wood in a quiver, loses its green by forgetting
so your being woman turns to stone and holds a clear and serene oblivion of [adverse times]

*like lightning, drawn to a target, the sweet arrow of your eyes and the ray
that, diaphanous, dense body, didn’t seem to obstruct your shiny, terse gaze
and I fell, I was and am and will be prey to your slings freed and taken
out of resistance, unbound in chains, wounded and unscathed, spooked, [surrendered]

*wharf woman, shipyard and docks, stock woman, melting pot and stop
lone poem woman between screens and screams, woman of firm forms and infirm [firms
woman of lay lullabies for yelpings and yappings, woman inferred through flora [and
saplings
woman who is woman in my eyes only, wealth of the world, health, joy

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3 Once again, Schiavone picks a very ambiguous title. The Italian word “piano”, which we translated as “plane” means both “slow, quiet” as in the musical instrument “pianoforte,” and “plane” as in the geometric and geographic sense of the word.
tender and sweet as flint when fuming it melts and flows as lava
that in itself dulls asperity and purity or as a fluid your rigidity
harder than a shell or an almond against the freeze that sinks into ice
and so you've inebriated my avatar trapping it in a net of rivers frozen and burnt

around the tree that beyond the tiles uncouples and climbs its own apexes
among flowery ones, herons fly, arid and barren, exiles among flimsy branches
or perch there silent and stunned after aerial transits, immobile
auspicious omens of our steady intimate thrill, at the sight of each other

you transfigured into an iconostasis of daily objects the presence
the water, the table, the bed, the clothes wrapped in the light sharpened for you
not foreshadowing a long familiarity with stairs, but illuminating, to the limit
the point where the question stops and the dwelling is quiet and evidence

From Preliminaries to The Description of a Hunt

to Nanni Balestrini, in memoriam

value went from vase to vase — for another history is possible
if we want it — he took a cup of cold water and tossed wheat flower on it —
the birds in silhouette against the dying sun — after stirring the mix
with a sprig of mint — from the center to the circle and yes from the circle to the
— know that the vase — he drank it and left —
what time is it? Five. Five in the morning or in the evening?

reflections of placentas and blind eyes in organic lights
intrauterine animal metamorphoses absorbed by crackles
interferences of halos at the brief passing of the dead
the field of the future seduced by fertility — egg white light is the moon tonight
and it's stasis the sphere from weekend to weekday
an ashen fury
    a sight in seclusion
moonless the walls imposed as a posture — vanished and the skyscrapers loom
rapacious traces of remote apexes remain
lights untied by derived verticals
  jagged lines of enormous piers

*  
crooked claw inflicted on the bare arm
drawn to hunt by instinct
to your high call by intent
forced by compulsion and art to an exact predation — what is it in beauty
that urges us to possess it? — from thin arms the bloodless flesh
detached hovers in symmetrical flight
a crow and the petals nadir and zenith

— teenagers in school uniforms, white shirts and black skirts
on bike or on foot scattered in groups against the rural landscape of Vietnam

*  
from Asia that offers milk to she bears
the rent rose sleeved in a vase
budded without wilting turned into writing
emblem of man exposed to winter
— a journey is but its own tale — reduced from divine to body
to the measure of the beast
forced to venereal habitations
to changing furies and quick runs along genealogies

— for the city limits of Cantò precede the city limits of Cantò
the city of Cantò wound up occupying the entirety of the dry land

*  
meek and foreign appeared to me
  a doe
golden antlers bright in the uncertain hour of summer dusk
spotted with freckles white the coat
brown the lashes
black the pupils — clinging to the banks with dread
the construction echo of an iterated
suburb
silenced in the end
  in part
by the river shaking off at the large bend
the Hudson snowed in
train cars running on the levy — a girl squatting in the reeds urinates
surprised by a few approaching boats
unaware of a snake
THE ÉPICIER

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Translated by Rainer Hanshe
A multitude of ungrateful people walk carelessly by the sacrosanct shop of an épicier. God forbid! Somewhat repulsive, filthy, and as ill-dressed as a boy, however cool and delighted the master may be, I regard them with solicitude and speak to them with the deference which the Constitutionnel holds for them. I pass by a dead man, a bishop, or a king without paying attention to them; but I never regard an épicier with indifference. In my eyes, the épicier, whose omnipotence dates only to a century, is one of the most beautiful expressions of modern society. Is he not, then, a being so sublime in resignation as to be remarkable for his utility; a constant source of sweetness, of light, and of beneficent foodstuffs? Finally, is he no longer the minister of Africa, the charge d'affaires of the Indies and of America? Certainly, the épicier is all that; but what puts the finishing touch to his perfections is that he is all of that without suspecting it. Does the obelisk know that it is a monument?

You infamous sniggerers, in whose shop did you enter where the épicier did not graciously smile at you, his cap in his hand, while you kept yours on your head? The butcher is rough, the baker is pale and grumpy; but the épicier, always ready to oblige, shows an amiable face in every district of Paris. Thus, whatever class the pedestrian may belong to in embarrassment, he is addressing himself neither to the forbidding science of the watchmaker, nor to the bastioned counter of bleeding meats where the butcher's wife is throned, nor to the defiant rack of the baker: between all of these open shops, he waits, he chooses that of the épicier to change a hundred-franc piece, or to ask for directions; it is guaranteed that this man, the most Christian of all merchants, is to all, the most well occupied; for the time that he gives to passersby, he steals it from himself. But even though you disturb him when entering his shop, for you make use of him, it is guaranteed that he will greet you; he will even address you with great interest, if the conversation goes beyond a simple question and turns to a confidence. Retain this axiom, repeat it to counterbalance strange calumnies: You would more easily find a woman with a bad figure than an impolite épicier.

From the height of their false grandeur, their implacable intelligence, or their artistically pruned beards, some people dared to say
Raca! to the épicer. They have made his name a word, an opinion, a thing, a system, a European and encyclopedic figure like his shop. They shout: You are épiciers! to pronounce an infinity of insults. It’s time to finish with these Diocletians of the épicerie. Why do you blame the épicer? Is it his more or less reddish brown, greenish, or chocolate pants? his blue socks in slippers, his false otter cap with a silver or dingy gold tassel, his apron with a triangular point stretching to his diaphragm? But can you, a vile society without an aristocracy, and who work like ants, find fault in him, the estimable symbol of labor? Could it be that an épicer is not supposed to think about the world at all, to ignore the arts, literature, and politics? and who thus engulfed the editions of Voltaire and of Rousseau? who then buys the Souvenirs and Regrets of Dubufe? who has used the plate of the Soldat laboureur, or the Convoi du pauvre, that of the Attaque de la barrière de Clichy? who weeps at melodramas, who takes the Legion of Honor seriously! who becomes a shareholder of impossible enterprises? who you see in the first galleries of the Opéra-Comique when they play Adolphe et Clara or Les Rendez-vous bourgeois? who hesitates to blow his nose at the Théâtre-Français when they sing Chatterton? who reads Paul de Kock? who runs to see and admire the Museum of Versailles? who caused the triumph of the Postillon de Longjumeau? who buys clocks with Mamelukes weeping over their steeds? who appoints the most dangerous members of the opposition, and who supports energetic measures of strength against agitators? The épicer, the épicer, always the épicer! You find him armed at the threshold with every necessity, even the most contrary ones, just as he is at his doorstep, not always understanding everything, but supporting everything by his silence, by his work, by his immobility, by his money! If we have not become savages, Spaniards, or Saint-Simonians, let us give thanks to the great army of épiciers. It maintained everything. Perhaps it will maintain both the republic as the empire, legitimacy as the new dynasty; but it will certainly maintain it. To maintain is its motto. If it did not maintain a social order of some sort, to whom would it sell? The épicer is the judged thing that advances or withdraws, speaks or is silent all the days of the great crises. Do you not admire in him his faith for consecrated sillinesses?

1 Short for racaille: rabble, riffraff.
Prevent him from flocking to Jeanne Grey’s painting, from endowing the children of General Foy, to subscribing to the Champ d’Asile, to rushing to the asphalt, to asking for the restoration of Napoleon’s ashes, to dressing his child with a Polish spear, or as an artillerist of the National Guard, according to the circumstances. You would try in vain, blowhard Journalism, you who, first, angle your plume and firmly press it down so as to honor him, smile at him, and incessantly shake at him the cat-flap of your subscription!

But has the importance of this viscera, which is indispensable to social life, and which the ancients might have deified, been well examined? Speculator, you build a neighborhood, or even a village; you have built few or more houses, you have been daring enough to erect a church; you find a species of inhabitants, you pick up a pedagogue, you hope for children; you have made something that has the air of a civilization, like a pie: there are mushrooms, chicken legs, crayfish, and dumplings; a presbytery, deputies, a rural guard, and the governed: nothing will hold, everything will dissolve, until you have united the microcosm with the strongest of social bonds, with an épicer. If you delayed establishing an épicer at the corner of main street, as you have established a cross above the bell-tower, everyone would leave. The bread, the meat, the tailors, the priests, the shoemakers, the government, the joist, all come by post, by haulage, or by coach; but the épicer must be there, stay there, get up first, lie down last; open his shop at all hours to barges, gossip, and merchants. Without him, there would be none of the excesses that distinguish modern society from the old societies to which brandy, tobacco, tea, and sugar were unknown. From his shop proceeds a triple production for each need: tea, coffee, chocolate, the conclusion of all actual breakfasts; taper, oil, and candle, the source of all light; salt, pepper, and nutmeg, which make up the rhetoric of cooking; rice, beans, and macaroni, which are necessary for all reasonable eating; sugar, syrups, and jam (otherwise life would be bitter); cheeses, prunes, and mendiants, which, according to Brillat-Savarin, give to dessert its physiognomy. But would that detail of the units at three angles, which the épicerie store embraces, not portray all of our needs? The épicer himself forms a trilogy: he is an elector, a national guardsman, and a juror. I do not know whether mockers have a stone under their left breasts; but it is impossible for me to ridicule
this man when, in the appearance of the agate marbles contained in his wooden jars, I remember the part that he played in my childhood. Ah! what place he occupies in the heart of the runts to whom he sells the paper for cocottes, kite rope, and sun-disks and sugared almonds! This man, who holds in his watch tapers for our funeral and in his eye a tear for our memory, is constantly in touch with our existence: he sells pen and ink to the poet, paint to the artist, glue to everyone. A gambler has lost everything, wants to kill himself: the épicierr will sell him bullets, powder, or arsenic; the vicious person hopes to regain everything: the épicierr will sell him playing cards.

Your mistress is coming: you will not invite her to breakfast without the intervention of the épicierr — if she makes a stain on her dress it will disappear with the poison, the soap, the potash. If, on some painful night, you yell with great cries for a light, the épicierr holds out to you the miraculous red cylinder, the illustrious Fumade, which is not dethroned by German lighters or luxurious valve-machines. You do not go to the ball without his varnish. Finally, he sells the host to a priest, a hundred-&-seven-year-old cognac to a soldier, a mask to a carnival reveler, cologne to the most beautiful half of the human race. Invalid, he will sell you the eternal tobacco which you pass from your snuff-box to your nose, from your nose to your handkerchief, from your handkerchief to your snuff-box: are not the nose, tobacco, and the handkerchief of an invalid an image of the infinite just as much as the snake biting its tail? He sells drugs that give death, and substances that give life; he sells himself to the public like a soul to Satan. He is the alpha and omega of our social state. You cannot take a step or a league, a crime or a good deed, a work of art or debauchery, a mistress or a friend, without resorting to the omnipotence of the épicierr. This man is civilization in a shop, society in a cornet, necessity armed from head to toe, the encyclopedia in action, life distributed in drawers, bottles, and sachets. We have preferred to take the protection of an épicierr to that of a king: that of the king kills you, that of the épicierr makes you live. If you abandon everything, even the devil or your mother, if you have an épicierr left for a friend, you will live through him, like the rat in his cheese. We stock everything, the épiciers tell you with just pride. Add: We want everything.
By what fatality has this social pivot, this tranquil creature, this practical philosopher, this incessantly occupied industry, been taken then as a type of stupidity? What virtues is he lacking? None. The eminently generous nature of the épicier enters much into the physiognomy of Paris. From one day to the next, moved by some catastrophe or by a party, does he not reappear in the luxury of his uniform, after having made the opposition a weak effort? His moving blue lines with undulating bonnets accompany the illustrious dead or the living who triumph in pomp and gallantly set themselves in flowery espaliers at the entrance of a royal bride. As for his constancy, it is fabulous. He alone has the courage to guillotine himself every day with a starched shirt collar. What inexhaustible fecundity in the return of his jokes with his practices! with what paternal consolations he picks up the two sous of the poor, the widow, and the orphan! with what a sense of modesty he enters his high-ranking customers! Are you saying that the épicier cannot create anything? QUINQUET was an épicier; after his invention, he became a French word, he spawned the industry of oil lamps.

Ah! If the épicerie shop would not furnish France’s peers or deputies, if it refused lanterns to our rejoicings, if it stopped guiding the wandering pedestrians, giving money to passersby, and a glass of wine to the woman who finds herself ill at the corner of the terminal, without checking her condition; if the quinquet of the épicerie no longer protested against his enemy’s gas, which was extinguished at eleven o’clock; if he were to withdraw from the Constitutional Chamber, if he became progressive, if he disagreed with the Monthyon Prize, if he refused to be the captain of his company, if he disdained the Cross of the Legion of Honor, if he were to listen to Berlioz’s symphonies at the Conservatoire, if he admired Géricault in due time, if he leafed through Cousin, if he understood Ballanche, he would be a depraved person who deserves to be the eternally dejected puppet, eternally raised, eternally adjusted by the salvation of the hungry artist, the ungrateful writer, the Saint-Simonian of despair. But examine him, O my fellow-citizens! What do you see in him? A man generally short, chubby, with a bulging belly, a good father, good husband, good master. At this word, let us stop.

Who imagined the figure of Happiness, other than in the form of a little épicer, a red-haired boy with a blue apron, a foot on the steps
of his shop, looking at women with a bawdy air, admiring his bourgeois, having nothing, laughing at the shoppers, satisfied with a ticket to a play, considering the patron a strong man, envying the day when he will make himself like a beard in a round mirror, while his wife will prepare his shirt, his tie, his pants? Is this true Arcadia? Being a shepherd as Poussin wants is no longer in our mores. Being an épicier, when your wife does not become enamored of a Greek who poisons you with your own arsenic, is one of the happiest human conditions.

Artists and feuilletonists, cruel mockers who insult the genius as well as the épicier, let us admit that this little round belly must inspire the malice of your pencils, yes, unfortunately some épiciers, in presenting weapons, present a Rabelaisian belly that disturbs the unexpected alignment of the ranks of the National Guard to a magazine, and we heard bitter complaints from the colonels. But who can conceive a pale and thin épicier? he would be dishonored, he would sour the impassioned, broken-down people. This is said: he has a belly. Napoleon and Louis XVIII had theirs, and the Chamber would not go without it. Two illustrious examples! But if you think that he is more confident with his advances than our friends with their purses, you will admire this man and forgive him many things. If he were not subject to failure, he would be the prototype of the good, the beautiful, the useful. He has no other vices than people with delicate eyes have in love, four leagues from Paris, a country of which the garden has thirty poles; to drape his bed and his bedroom in curtains of yellow calico printed with red rosettes; to sit on Utrecht velvet with flowered brushes; he is the eternal accomplice of these infamous things. One generally laughs at the diamond that he wears in his shirt, and at the wedding ring that adorns his hand; but the one signifies the established man, as the other announces marriage, and no one would imagine an épicier without a wife. The wife of the épicier has shared a fate even in the hell of French mockery. And why was she sacrificed by making her thus doubly victim? She wanted, it is said, to go to court. What woman seated at a counter does not feel the need to leave it, and where will virtue go, except in the vicinity of the throne? for she is virtuous: infidelity rarely hovers over the épicier’s head, not that his wife lacks the graces of her sex, but she lacks opportunity. The wife of an épicier, as an example has proved,
can only end her passion by crime, so well guarded is she. The exiguity of the place, the invasion of the commodity, which ascends from market to market and lays down its candles, its sugar loaves, as far as the threshold of the conjugal chamber, are the guardians of its virtue, always exposed to public glances. So, forced to be virtuous, she attaches herself so much to her husband that most grown-up épicière women grow thin. Take a cabriolet on time, travel through Paris, look at the épiciers’ wives: all are thin, pale, yellow, weary. Hygiene, when questioned, spoke of miasmas exhaled by colonial commodities; the pathology, consulted, said something about the sedentary attendance at the counter, the continual movement of the arms, the voice, the constantly awakened attention, the cold that entered through an always open door and reddened the nose. Perhaps, by throwing these reasons at the noses of the curious, did not science dare to say that fidelity was something fatal to épiciers, perhaps it feared to afflict the épiciers by showing them the disadvantages of virtue. Be that as it may, in these households, where you see eating and drinking shut up under the glass of this large jar, otherwise named by their back-shop, revive and flourish the sacramental customs that honor the hymen. Never will an épicer, in any quarter that you test him, say this word: my wife; he will say: my lady. My wife brings to mind crazy, strange, subaltern ideas, and changes a divine creature into a thing. The Indians have wives; civilized beings have ladies; young girls, who from eleven to twelve went to the mayor’s office accompanied by an infinite number of parents and acquaintances, adorned with a crown of orange blossoms still lying under the pendulum, so that the Mameluke does not cry exclusively on the horse. So, always proud of his victory, the épicer leading his wife through the city, there is something sumptuous that the caricaturist signals. He feels so well the happiness of leaving his shop, his wife rarely grooms herself, her dresses are so puffy, that an épicer adorned with his wife takes up more room on the public road than any other couple. Had he got rid of his otter cap and his round waistcoat, he would look pretty much like any other citizen; those words, my dear friend, which he frequently uses when explaining the changes of Paris to his wife, who, confined to her counter, ignores the novelties. If sometimes, on Sundays, he ventures to take a rural walk, he sits down at the most powdery spot in the woods of Romainville,
Vincennes, or Auteuil, and raves about the purity of the air. There, as everywhere, you will recognize him, in all his disguises, his phraseology, his opinions. You go by a public carriage to Meaux, Melun, Orleans, you find a well-dressed man in front of you, who cast a suspicious glance at you: you are exhausting yourself in conjectures about this uniqueness, taciturn from the start. Is he an attorney? Is he a new peer of France? Is he a bureaucrat? A suffering woman says she has not yet recovered from cholera. The conversation begins. The unknown one speaks.

— Mister... Everything is said, the épicer himself declares. An épicer does not say either gentleman, which is affected, nor m'sieu, which seems infinitely contemptuous; he found his triumphant mosieu, which is between respect and protection, expresses his consideration, and gives to himself a wonderful flavor. — Mosieu, he said to you, during the cholera, the three greatest doctors, Dupuytren, Broussais, and Mieux Gendendie, each treated their patients with different remedies; all of them are dead, or nearly so. They have not known what cholera is; but cholera is a disease from which one dies. Those that I saw were already bad. That moment, mosieu didn’t do such bad business.

You then probed him on politics. His politics are reduced to this: "Mosieu, it appears that the ministers do not know what they are doing! We change them, but it’s always the same thing. It was only under the Emperor that we were well. But what a man! By losing him, France has lost. And to say that he was not supported!"

You then discover, at the épicer’s, extremely reprehensible religious opinions. The songs of Beranger are his Gospel. Yes, those hateful adulteries of politics have done an evil that the épicerie will feel for a long time. It may be a hundred years before an épicer in Paris — those of the province are a little less affected with the song — enters Paradise. Perhaps his desire to be French dragged him too far. God will judge him.

If the journey were short, if the épicer did not speak (a rare case), you would recognize him by his own way of blowing his nose. He puts a corner of his handkerchief between his lips, raises it to the center with a swinging movement, masterfully grabs his nose, and sounds a fanfare to make a piston-cornet jealous.
Some of those people, who have a mania for digging into everything at a great inconvenience to the épicier: he retires, they say. Once removed, no one sees any use in him. What is he doing? what becomes of him? He is without interest, without physiognomy. The defenders of this class of estimable citizens replied that generally the épicier’s son becomes a notary or confessor, never a painter or journalist, which authorizes him to say with pride: I paid my debt to the country. When an épicier has no son, he has a successor to whom he is interested; he encourages him, he comes to see the amount of daily sales and compares them to those of his time; he lends him money: he still holds the épicerie by the thread of the discount. Who does not know the touching anecdote about the nostalgia of the counter to which he is subject?

An épicer of the old school, who, for thirty years, had breathed the thousand smells of his floor, descended the river of life in the company of a myriad of herrings, and traveled side by side with an infinity of cod, swept the periodical mud of a hundred morning practices, and handled good fat under great fat; this man, rich far beyond his desires, having buried his wife in a good little land in perpetuity, all in good order, a receipt from the city to the carton of family papers; he walks the first days in Paris like a bourgeois; he watches the domino players, he even goes to the theater. But he had, he said, some anxiety. He stopped before a string of épiceries, he smelled them, he listened to the sound of the pestle in the mortar. In spite of himself, this thought: You have been all that! resounded in his ear, at the sight of an épicer brought to the step of his door by the state of heaven. Submissive to the magnetism of spices, he came to visit his successor. The épicerie store was flourishing. Our man was returning with a big heart. He was everything, he said to Broussais, consulting him on his illness. Broussais arranged his journeys, without positively indicating Switzerland or Italy. After a few distant excursions, unsuccessfully attempted at Saint-Germain, Montmorency, Vincennes, the poor épicer, who was always wasting away, could no longer endure it — he returned to his shop like the pigeon of La Fontaine to his nest, saying his great proverb: I am like the hare, I die wherever I attach myself! He obtained from his successor the grace of making cornets in a corner, the favor of replacing him at the counter. His eye, which had already become like that of a cooked fish, lit up
with gleams of pleasure. In the evening, at the local cafe, he blamed the trend of the épicerie store for the charlatanism of the Fad, and asked what was the use of exposing the brilliant machines that crush cocoa.

Several épiciers, strong heads, became the mayors of some commune, and cast over the countryside a reflection of Parisian civilization. They then begin to open the Voltaire or Rousseau they bought, but they give up by page 17 of the preface. Always useful to their country, they have had a watering place repaired; they have reduced the salaries of the parish priest and restricted the invasions of the clergy. Some go so far as to write their views to the Constitutionalists, whose answers they await in vain; others provoke petitions against the slavery of the negroes and against the death penalty.

I only reproach the épicer one fault: he is in too great a quantity. Of course he will agree; he is common. Some moralists, who have observed him out of the latitude of Paris, pretend that the qualities that distinguish him turn into vices as soon as he becomes a proprietor. He then contracts, it is said, a slight tint of ferocity, cultivates the command, the assignment, the formal notice, and loses his approval. I will not contradict those accusations, perhaps based on the critical time of the épicer. But look at the different kinds of men, study their quirks, and ask yourself what is complete in this valley of miseries. Let’s be indulgent toward épiciers! Besides, where would we be if they were perfect? They should be adored, entrusted with the reins of the state, to whose chariot they courageously harnessed themselves. Forgive the snigglers to whom this memorandum is addressed, leave them where they are, do not torment those interesting bipeds too much: do not you have enough to do with government, new books, and vaudeville shows?
All grandmas make the same soup. “But nobody makes it as good as my grandma!” everyone says. An orange color soup, with little eyes. That is, that bit of fat that comes to the surface in the form of small circles: little eyes that look like tiny dancers moving around, performing an intricate gastronomic choreography. If the soup has rice in it, a few grains often end up in the middle of these circles, while the green of the parsley floats around them.
A soup that was quite fatty, but not too fatty. Poured in white bowls set on a long table without a tablecloth in a dark kitchen. Many bowls. My grandma had six daughters, a son, a husband, and a young shop apprentice. My grandma’s daughters made Lenci dolls on that kitchen table, before the soup showed up every evening.

I know how to perfectly paint the head of a Lenci doll: the shade above the eyes, the heart-shaped mouth, the red dots on the nose. Back then I was a little ashamed of it. Now nobody lets me paint them anymore.

The shop apprentice always sat in the same place at that table. He was a special kind of apprentice: fifty years old, or maybe even older. Shop apprentices, if they didn’t move on, stayed apprentices their entire lives. And they died apprentices, especially if they worked in a shop that sold firewood and coal.

The apprentice in the firewood and coal shop my grandfather ran was ageless as far as our clients were concerned. The black dust that covered his face completely hid his wrinkles. It was hard to determine the color of his eyes because he always looked down. When you carry baskets full of coal on your back, you must watch where you put your feet. His body was shaped like an S.

Hunched over, eyes to the ground, this human S showed up every night at grandma’s house to eat this soup. Which was his entire salary. Plus his tips, naturally. Who knows if it meant “good evening,” that mumble he would utter as he crossed the kitchen threshold, or perhaps a disguised curse. It certainly wasn’t addressed at my grandmother who was dishing out his salary, but maybe to himself, aware of being forced to remain an apprentice the rest of his life. Nobody answered that hello-curse-mumble. Grandma was busy with the soup, her daughters talking about dolls, her son was never there, grandpa had already eaten, and I was observing intently. He sat at the table and kept the same posture he did while standing, an S, only just a bit shorter. His black face, held a foot from the table, with the orange soup in front of him. His eyes constitutionally focused on the bowl, his hand holding the spoon, and a regular slurping rhythm as he ate. A monotonous sucking sound, always the same. A supping he used to cool down the boiling liquid, and to enjoy that steam that lingered on his face, moistening it.
Then, suddenly, silence. My grandmother knew this was a sign the first bowl of soup was gone. She would swap out the empty bowl, careful not to bump his chin, and replace it with another filled with orange soup with the little eyes.

He would “slurp” eight, ten, twelve bowls. Always following the same rhythm. His shiny face had orange-black beads of sweat dripping down into the bowl. The soup turned darker and darker, his face lighter and lighter. Soup, sweat, coal, all disappeared inside his chest. Then he would get up. And then, when I looked at him, I could finally see his face, two blue eyes, a defeated gaze, along with all his fifty years of age. Too many for an apprentice.

Another mumble-curse-goodbye, and he’d leave with a clean face, freshly laundered by the soup.

**Grandma’s Soup**

*Ingredients:*
- 50g of pancetta
- A sprig of parsley
- Two cloves of garlic
- Half a twig of rosemary
- All chopped finely with a mezzaluna
- Rice
- Oil
- Provolone or parmiggiano

I know many will resort to a food processor, if they have it. But there is a difference between a food processor and a mezzaluna. The appliance will give you a mangled pulp, while chopping patiently using a mezzaluna you’ll get a different kind of pesto. The difference will be clear at the end of the cooking process.

Add tomato paste to the herb mixture.

In my grandma’s day, tomato paste was almost black in color because of how concentrated it was. Nowadays it has a much kinder appearance and is much less violent, so it will be hard to get that same powerful but pasty flavor the soup had back then. Anyways, let’s say you have to add to the mixture as much double-concentrated paste so the soffritto takes on a deep dark red color (which will turn orange once water is added). I remember that
grandma added to the mixture and the paste two or three cubed potatoes and two liters of water. Wait until the potatoes are cooked through. Grandma, using a fork, would smash the potatoes, holding them inside a ladle. You smash them too. It's only right that one should follow these procedures according to the old ways, so the soup will also taste it like it did back then. That's the only way the soup will have that flavor that's now all but gone.

Once it was cooked, grandma would add indifferently rice or pasta. I have the vague suspicion she might have added a bit of olive oil too. Or else the little eyes wouldn't appear. To finish the soup grandma would add some grated provolone, which was the poor man's cheese. I would recommend trying provolone today too. The tang of provolone will add to the soup an even more intense flavor. For those who don't like provolone, parmiggiano.

I'm not saying you should make this soup every night, but every now and then have fun wasting time in the kitchen. Maybe it's the only wasted time you'll never regret.
AS PLINTH TO PROSCENIUM:
GIACOMETTI & SADE

John Galbraith Simmons

Man Ray, Model holding the *Disagreeable Object* (1931)
I. Witnesses to History

How to qualify and characterize Alberto Giacometti’s rapport with Sade? It clearly dates to the years he belonged to the surrealist group (1929–1935), but a closer look shows that it was essentially lifelong and involved a considerable dose of personal affinity. In a purely intellectual register, interest in Sade was shared with a wide range of French intellectuals. But with Giacometti there was a distinctive and energetic compatibility. In 2019 the Giacometti Institute mounted the exhibit Giacometti/Sade: Cruels objets du désir to examine the intersection by way of the artist’s sculptures, constructions, and drawings.1 The evidence presented is also contained in occasional notes and sketches — communicated but scarcely articulated. How to understand its substance?

Certainly, enough time has passed — Sade is dead in 1814 and Giacometti in 1966, now 60 years ago. History collides with modernism, and modernism comes away with a good deal of net worth but also catastrophes that cannot be forgotten; and it abides in the works of both, but it cannot be extracted pure. In consequence of which, to consider the interface of these two figures, we can conveniently keep (though not strictly) to chronology.

II. The Transparent Coffin

To see how Giacometti fits into the 20th century Sadean narrative, we could do worse than begin with Snow White. That means looking to the storybook version of the fable, as the artist did while still a child. He remembered it as the first drawing from a book he ever made. The beautiful young heroine lies in her coffin all made of glass, surrounded by the seven dwarfs who loved her. She is not dead, of course, but will come alive with the attentions of a passing prince. The apple she’d bit into at the insistence of her wicked stepmother is stuck in her throat. When it’s dislodged, she awakens. The Prince makes her his queen while her evil, envious, vengeful stepmother is forced to put on piping hot iron shoes and, as an obligate guest at Snow White’s wedding, dance to her death.

When it comes to cruelty, who besides Sade does it better than the Brothers Grimm? He is right for all ages and the consanguinity is telling. “[O]ne cannot separate [Sade] from the tradition of atheism that runs from Fréret to Diderot, the Curé Meslier to Grimm,” writes Annie Le Brun, “from Toland to d’Holbach — unfettered intellects of such great breadth and vigor that they upset western thinking in the space of a few decades.”2 Add Giacometti, age eight in 1909. It was one of many drawings he made taken from illustrations in books.

Thoughts of cruelty obsessed him as a child, notes his biographer, James Lord. “Sadistic impulses seem to have been present in the boy’s temperament, though he must have repressed or sublimated most of them.”3 Young Giacometti shared the pleasure some children obtain from intentionally dismantling insects and torturing small animals. Destruction and drawing went together. At age twelve, already clearly in the footsteps of his father, a well-known artist strongly influenced by the Impressionists, Alberto made his first copy of an engraving by Albrecht Dürer: Knight, Death, and the Devil.

III. Rebirthing Sade: From Germany with Love

For Sade’s broad and enduring influence, we can also start with the dawn of the 20th century. Until the last couple of decades, the 19th century had largely stifled serious talk of him, with exceptions such as Swinburne. But he was taken up in in a medico-psychiatric context in 1904 with publication in Germany of an elaborate biographical essay on Sade and a partial version of 120 Days of Sodom, owing to the labors of Iwan Bloch (under the pseudonym Eugen Dühren). Trained as a dermatologist, Bloch has a claim to have founded sexology as an anthropological approach to the sexual life of mankind; but reading his work, it must be said, makes it seem a wonder the First World War didn’t begin sooner. “Since the 16th century,” he wrote in Marquis de Sade: His Life and Works, a text suffused with Gallopho-

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2 Annie Le Brun, Sade: A Sudden Abyss (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990) 43.
bia, “pederasty had found an increasing horde of devotees in Paris...” He added, “The Revolution ... brought this vice to the highest point.”

But it was the poet Apollinaire who really brought Sade into the 20th century. Employed by the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he helped catalogue the section of banned books, in 1909 he published his famous monograph and anthology: *L’Œuvre du Marquis de Sade, pages choisies, introduction, essai bibliographique et notes*. Famously calling him the “freest spirit who ever lived,” the poet’s foundational essay would set the stage for Sade’s genuine rehabilitation after World War I.

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IV. Two Journeys to Italy

Born to a family of Italian Protestants in Switzerland, Giacometti grew up in comfortable circumstances. He was a good son who took after his father and would adore his mother until her death at age 93, not long before his own. Throughout his childhood, Alberto developed as something of a prodigy, with all the implications of eccentricity it implies. Early on he began to sculpt, which put acceptable distance from his father Giovanni in terms of ambition. By temperament independent but also congenial and obedient, Giacometti received a partly classical education. He was a successful student, well-liked and unchallenged.

In 1920, through the good offices of his father, he was able to visit Italy. In Venice he greatly admired works by Tintoretto, with their bold detail and sometimes haunting use of space. Just before he left the city, however, he discovered Giotto and, according to Lord, was “shaken by his recognition that the Florentine’s greatness was more powerful even than that of his Venetian idol.” With respect to which it should be noted — because he would do it again — that Giacometti’s admiration was moving chronologically in reverse, from the 16th to the 13th century. Immediately following his insight, he further noted, came an emotional crisis, the very same evening, when he encountered several young women on the street whose movements “were charged with a dreadful violence.” This “terrifying” event, with a clear sexual component, would be the first of several (and perhaps many more and unrecorded) sudden perceptual shifts that sound at times quasi-epileptic.

Sade also visited Italy. Twice. Once in 1772 to avoid being decapitated — his effigy was executed instead — when he fled France in the company of his sister-in-law, with whom he was having a torrid affair. And again in 1775, once again as evasion, when he traveled incognito to avoid arrest and extradition. He used the time to gather a wealth of information on Italian art and began writing an extensive Voyage to Italy, which would not be published until the 20th century.

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7 Quoted by Lord, Giacometti: A Biography, 39.
(and in English translation only in the 21st). Among the host of sites he visited was the basilica of St. Peter, where he viewed what remained of Giotto’s huge mosaic of Navicella — the “Little Ship” with Jesus Christ, walking on the water, joined by St. Peter.

V. Transit to the Past, Passage to the Future

Giacometti would become so intimately associated with life in Paris by way of its brothels and cafés, and also his studio/living space on rue Hippolyte Maindron, that it is difficult to discern his apprenticeship to modernism, which may be dated from his arrival in 1922 until either 1925, when he stopped attending the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, or to 1929, when he joined the Surrealist Group. He only developed fluency in French over time and slowly made friends outside his Italian circle. But it should be stipulated that Gia-

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8 Donatien Alphonse Sade, Journey to Italy, tr. James A. Steintrager, Lorenzo Da Ponte Italian Library (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).
cometti was powerfully easy to like and admire, and he would become a fine conversationalist while remaining outside any academic orbit; he was never less than non-conformist and idiosyncratic in outlook and way of life.

What must be described as an emotional and artistic crisis, dating to 1925, made for a decision to stop sculpting from live models. Giacometti apparently destroyed many of his early conventional works, but from 1926 are dated such sculptures as he would eventually show. His surviving works pass through stages influenced by Cubism — *Torso* (*Torse*), for example, and African art, and he developed a love of Cycladic and Sumerian sculpture. These influences are present in *The Couple* (1926) — side-by-side male and female figures — and the Dan-inspired *Spoon-Woman* (*Femme cuillère*), with the central concave belly and evocative and highly stylized head, also from 1926. Both satisfy criteria Giacometti himself described in his notebook: “Object independent of the forms that exist in nature, like organic beings.” He moved onto a series of plaster plaques that, although he later disparaged, have been widely admired.
Although it is unsurprising that Giacometti’s emotional life did not align with his conventional upbringing, the extraordinary extent to which relational conflicts and compromise solutions combined life and work alike is of a piece with the rest. In late adolescence, for example, living in Rome in 1920, he’d been obsessed with a beautiful cousin, Bianca. She was at best indifferent; he’d become her slave. He later recounted what happened, about the same time, when he met a street walker: he took her home with him intending to draw her but then, despite trepidation, had sex with her. The effect was electric. “I literally exploded with enthusiasm. I shouted, ‘It’s cold. It’s mechanical!’” Ambivalence toward both sexuality and conventional relationships translated into a lifelong and unapologetic enthusiasm for prostitution.

At the same time: impotence. Giacometti claimed on several occasions that it played an adaptive role in his emotional life. Riven by jealousy aggravated by sexual impotence, his first significant relationship, with the American-born Flora Lewis Mayo, disintegrated. “I always felt very deficient sexually,” Giacometti told Jean Clay in 1963, recalling that when he arrived in Paris in 1922, he avoided intimate relationships. “That’s also why I’ve always preferred seeing prostitutes... The notion of ‘love,’ that equivocal and awkward blend of feelings and physical gestures, has always embarrassed me.” A complicating factor was apparent reproductive sterility owing to mumps contracted in late adolescence, with ensuing orchitis.

Sade and Giacometti meet for the first time in their attitudes toward both sexuality and relationships. Although the artist-sculptor was not a libertine and the author-prisoner was not afflicted with impotence, Giacometti’s ability to develop long-term alliances — he married three times — was not so different from Sade’s relationships with women, which involved equal amounts of complicity and libertinage. It is generally conceded that Sade was bi-sexual, as famously witnessed by the whores in Marseilles that led to his conviction on charges of pederasty and execution in absentia in 1772. Giacometti’s own homo-erotically-tinged — apparently non-physical —

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10 Quoted in Lord, Giacometti: A Biography, 47.
relationships began with his adoration at age 14 of the beautiful Simon Béard, and continued (as the one adored), with the much older Peter van Meurs, who died suddenly during their trip to Venice in 1921. Similarly, his relationship with Isaku Yanaihara, the Japanese professor Giacometti painted and with whom his wife had an affair in the 1950s.

VI. Surrealist and Other Aspirations

In the wake of the First World War, the avant-garde poets recognized Sade’s significance even before publication of the First Manifesto of Surrealism. Besides Breton himself, Robert Desnos, writing for the group in 1923, suggested that "in essence, all our current aspirations were formulated by Sade." Paul Éluard wrote that “Sade wanted to restore to civilized man the power of his primitive instincts" — reflecting the contemporary interest in pre-Columbian and African art. Surrealism was also already reaching past artistic into social and political realms, and so included film. Sadean imagery suffused Bunuel’s Un Chien andalou (1929), and L’Age d’or (1930) famously concludes with Jesus Christ exiting the Chateau Silling, the site of 120 Days of Sodom. There was Man Ray’s Monument to D.A.F. Sade in 1933, and his imaginary portrait in 1938, with the Bastille burning as revolutionary backdrop. Sade also came in for imitation with fiction such as Irene’s Cunt by Louis Aragon and poetry such as Benjamin Peret’s Mad Balls. Beginning with Breton’s manifestoes, the surrealists famously had developed a myriad of progenitors and precursors. Of them all, Sade was perhaps the most significant; he would certainly be among the most durable.

For Giacometti, affinity turned to adherence in 1929, when he formally joined the surrealist group. He was highly valued. “And there is nothing dead in [his] sculpture,” wrote Michel Leiris, who also evaluated Picasso about the same time. “On the contrary, everything is there ... as with real fetishes people can idolize — that is, the

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13 Ibid., 10.
ones ennobling us…”14 Notable early pieces were *Cage* and *Suspended Ball*, both from 1930. Breton himself purchased the latter, and it encouraged the production of “surrealist objects.” The surrealist’s patron Charles de Noailles purchased *Gazing Head*, an evocative and flowing but almost abstract plaster plaque from 1927. In all these works, eroticism was a key element, often inflected by undertones of sexual violence. In 1932 Giacometti published in *La Révolution surréaliste* a pair of calligrams and a poetic text with intimations of cruelty that were of a piece with such works as *Woman With Her Throat Cut*.

“Yesterday read Sade,” Giacometti wrote in 1933, “who interests me greatly and I intend to continue.”15 That came at Breton’s suggestion shortly after the artist had been devastated and depressed by the sudden death of his father. *120 Days of Sodom* was just then being published in a limited edition, and such a prescription to allay mourning was, on Breton’s part, possibly a bit of lay psychoanalysis — a suggestive effort to expose unconscious aggression toward the

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14 Cited in di Crescenzo, 63.
lost object — for the novel is a remarkable mockery and disparagement of fathers that attacks every reader’s sense of right conduct and parental love.

Formal membership in the surrealist group was an aleatory enterprise for all, and Giacometti was no exception. Nevertheless, his productions over the course of several years laid the basis for his fame, then and now: *Point to the Eye* (1932) with its distillation of Buñuel; *Disagreeable Object*, more than recalling the giant dildoes Sade requested his wife have made for him while imprisoned; *The Palace at 4 a.m.* (1932), a literal stage set; and *No More Play* (1933), among others. Giacometti left the group, or was expelled, in 1935. But he would remain close to Bataille and other excluded friends and, indeed, remained on amiable enough terms with Breton himself to participate in the 1959 Tate exhibit, “Desire Unbound.”

**VII. The Concrete Thinker**

As evinced by his work early and late, what is profound and new about Giacometti is the dialectic he entertains with the inner world of intellectual agony set against the real world of genuine misery, all amidst unprecedented cultural transformations. The surrealist dreamscapes are one moment in this dialectic, infused with intimations of cruelty and aggression. There may be a thousand ways to describe *Woman With Her Throat Cut* and *Point to the Eye* but all of them include actions done (or promised or threatened) to real bodies in the real world. Like almost everybody, Giacometti left cubism behind; like most, he deserted surrealism; but he didn’t move to abstraction.

For years after the surrealist phase, Giacometti wrestled with the return to figurative sculpture before succeeding with the use of “penknives like weapons,” as Serena Bucalo-Mussela suggests. “In the pieces he made after [World War II], violence is not visible in the subject represented, but integrated in the act of creation itself.” Both in sculpture, little knives (preserved, in fact); and in painting, “vio-
lent brush strokes [that] alternate with strokes with the handle and the knife to sculpt then to scratch and shape the oval of the faces."¹⁶

The underlying machinery of this dialectic involves Giacometti’s strange combination of concrete and abstract thinking. Early in his career he had “developed a capacity for abstraction,” writes Lord acutely, “a disposition to establish between himself and the objects of his perception, a psychic as well as a physical distance.”¹⁷ Lord’s judgments should not be taken as the observations of a connoisseur aesthete; they’re based on deep knowledge of both the man and his work.¹⁸ “This [capacity] leads to the propensity for creating symbols and activates the imagination by providing for a relationship with reality which does not depend principally on reality itself.”

At the same time, Giacometti was also given to “concrete thinking” — that is, as a cognitive style. In psychoanalytic theory it’s often loosely associated with pathology, but as a concept it originated as the third of Jean Piaget’s four-stage theory of cognitive development. Concrete thinking as a style helps explain both the larger dimensions of Giacometti’s work and the fascination he held for other key figures in what has become a modernist pantheon. Recall his view of sex as “mechanical.” Then, too, the fact that he considered human hair to be “a lie,” and once demanded that his wife Annette, who was posing for him, shave her head.¹⁹ In his long interview with David Sylvester, Giacometti said that he’d grown sensitive to the distance between a table and a chair — 50 centimeters — and that was all he needed to live in. “In a way it’s become as vast as the world.”²⁰ And, finally, nocturnal illumination required: his youthful friendship with Peter van Meurs that ended in the latter’s death. Thereafter Giacometti slept

¹⁶ Bucalo-Mussely, in Giacometti/Sade: Cruels objets du désir, 73.
¹⁷ Lord, Giacometti: A Biography, 40.
¹⁸ Giacometti, quite unlike Picasso, was exceptionally lucky, or astute, in his choice of biographer, who operated with unsparing honesty, and was as critical as he was admiring, supplementing his biography with a personal memoir that became the basis of the 2017 film Final Portrait, featuring as Giacometti the actor Geoffrey Rush — who, incidentally, also portrayed Marquis de Sade in the film Quills. On Picasso’s biographers, see T.J. Clark, Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica, A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013) 4.
with a night light burning for the rest of his life; it could not be otherwise.

Concrete thinking has a good fit with the work of a plastic artist. Whatever its disadvantages and however eccentric, Giacometti’s use of it was highly adaptive. It enabled his unapologetic non-conformity and it undergirded the way he perceived the world — literally. Most famously, not long after the end of World War II, while in a darkened theater watching a newsreel, Giacometti experienced a perceptual revelation that changed the way he viewed the world — and sculpted and painted it. Suddenly he saw on the screen “black and white specks shifting on a flat surface.” He recalled: “Everything was different, space and objects and colors and the silence, because the sense of space generates silence, bathes objects in silence.”

Alberto Giacometti, *Pointe à l’œil (Relations désagrégantes)* (c. 1931–2)

VIII. Giacometti/Sade: Plinth and Proscenium

World War II and the Holocaust would confer renewed relevance on Marquis de Sade in ways that would turn him into a social prophet and discharge his value as a uniquely negative philosopher who was willing to follow the Enlightenment to its naturalistic conclusions. Sade proposed a logic rooted in atheism that had acquired new meaning in light of real-world outcomes: the imperialist and colonial imperatives and the slaughter of war. He’d been long ignored as a serious thinker or, indeed, a thinker at all, his influence restricted to

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a fringe of literati, and as reference in psychiatry. Now, as Klossowski put it, Sade became, if not your friend, your neighbor.\(^{22}\)

Although for years at a time filled with doubt about his direction and the worth of what he produced, Giacometti finally viewed his work in aggrandized terms, literally as a point of culmination of the history of art. “Nobody works like me,” he said toward the end of his life, and he claimed no future for painting. He himself represented an endpoint. Giacometti believed that he belonged, as Lord puts it, “at the extreme end of a tradition, one which stretched backward from Cézanne to Rembrandt, to Vélasquez, Tintoretto, and Michelangelo, to Giotto, and Cimabue, to the Byzantines, the Greeks, and finally the Egyptians.” Painting as we know it, he said, “has no future in our civilization.”\(^{23}\)

In the end, just because he was a painter and sculptor, Giacometti’s relationship to Sade should be viewed not only through his own works and notebooks but also by the presence of three figures in his post-war life: Georges Bataille, Samuel Beckett, and Jean Genet. In living relation to modernity, all three can serve as proxies for Sade.

First, Beckett. Just before the war, in 1938, Jack Kahane had considered translating \textit{120 Days of Sodom} for his Obelisk Press. He inquired of Beckett, who viewed the novel as “one of the capital works of the 18th century.” As he wrote at the time, “Nothing could be less pornographical. It fills me with a kind of metaphysical ecstasy.” In the late 1940s Beckett would meet Giacometti in the Café de Flore and thereafter they often reconnoitered for long nocturnal walks—a “very private, almost secretive friendship”\(^{24}\). For the 1961 production of \textit{Waiting for Godot}, it was Giacometti who created the slender, curvaceous tree, the lone dressing for the stage.

Giacometti met Jean Genet through Sartre, whose \textit{St. Genet: Actor and Martyr}, was published in 1952. As Catholic League president William Donahue (qualified by God) put it, Genet was a “direct descendant of the Marquis de Sade. Which is to say he was a pedophile.

\(^{23}\) Lord, \textit{Giacometti: A Biography}, 446–47.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 190.
homosexual, sado-masochist, pervert and prostitute." Glimpsing Genet in a café, Giacometti was "so impressed by his appearance that he was eager to do his portrait." He did in fact pose for one of Giacometti's monochromatic portraits and the two became close friends; Genet composed a book of his own, the impressionistic The Studio of Alberto Giacometti.

Finally, Georges Bataille, whom Giacometti met early, in the mid-1920s, and remained close to during the surrealist period and after. It was Bataille, as Geoffrey Roche notes (perhaps with some exaggeration), who "almost single-handedly established Sade's place in the realm of ideas" in publishing such works as his "The Use Value of D.A.F. Sade," the essay (written in 1930 but not published until later) which, though flawed and certainly today dated, brought Sade into a new light. Bataille continued to examine Sade after the war, during which Giacometti created some of his most powerful works, such as Man Walking and Head on a Rod, both from 1947.

Just as theater provides the frame for all of Sade's fiction, from 120 Days of Sodom to Philosophy in the Bedroom, not to mention the staged orgies and dialogues in Juliette — the plinth, in short, becomes Giacometti’s proscenium. His attraction to Sade is evident across multiple frames of reference, from the basic notion of liberating the imagination by revealing its infantile components to the more complex articulation, both literary and visual, of philosophical notions associated with surrealism and modernism more generally. Above all, Sade and Giacometti share a commitment to the primacy of embodied desire, immanent in life, work, and legacy.

IRA COHEN, INTO THE MYLAR CHAMBER
Edited by Allan Graubard

REVIEW BY JASON WEISS
There is so much to look at in Ira Cohen’s photographs from the Mylar Chamber. Each glance finds more to see even as the pictures jump out at us with their bright, bending colors and the mysterious poses of the figures, which multiply and disintegrate amid scenescapes concocted from an array of cloths and materials, refracted endlessly. Theatrical in nature (costumes, makeup, lighting), the images often echo moments from art history or mythology or comics, while carrying the charge of the uncertain present in which they were made. Ever unpredictable, they are playful in spirit and form, much as the light is playful springing off the mirrored surfaces: after all, it is in that bank shot where the photo emerges, the camera gazing into the compounded reflections to track where they go.

Initially a poet and publisher, Cohen (1935–2011) took up photography as an additional practice relatively late, in the mid-1960s, after returning to New York from four years in Tangier. Living in a loft on the Lower East Side, in 1968 he built a room there made of hinged boards hung with sheets of silver Mylar to serve as a photo studio for exploring the possibilities of mirror effects. That same year, enthused by these experiments, he also made his first film by way of the Mylar techniques, The Invasion of Thunderbolt Pagoda, a trippy communal performance that retains a certain glow in the annals of underground cinema. The magic chamber in his loft, however, remained the prime focus of his activities. Until 1971, he would gather friends and collaborators (Bill Devore, Jack Smith, Angus MacLise, many more) for extended sessions in which they helped develop an elaborate iconography that was quite unique. The work gained enough notice that it led to commissions for record covers—his remarkable portraits of Jimi Hendrix, John McLaughlin, the rock band Spirit became part of those experiments in Mylar vision and of the widening cast of characters in that strange dream theater.

The photos from that three-year period, before Cohen left New York for Kathmandu, were much talked about in their time and through the decades since. They left a resonant trace in the cultural memory. Yet somehow it is only now, fifty years later, that a book has been devoted to this spellbinding work. Into the Mylar Chamber, a large format volume, offers a rich dossier of sixty-five photos
interspersed with brief extracts from his poetry, all surrounded by seven texts by artists and scholars and more photos tucked among them. The very opening lines of the book, from a 1999 text by Cohen, lay out his intentions clearly: “I make my photographs in the tradition of the alchemist and rely on the forms and rituals connected with the arts of divination and scrying (crystal gazing). Searching in a world of reflections I invoke the Spirits, both celestial and demonic.” That’s quite a statement of purpose, but the pages that follow do bring the goods. The viewer is soon caught up in the painterly sweep of the images, often just a single figure among its own fused multiples, repetitions of a face or a leg and with each repetition a slightly different angle and distortion in the mirrored reflections so that each face a little different, as though one person were many at the same time, but how can that be.
In an interview with his longtime associate Ira Landgarten, who scanned and restored the images in the book, Cohen spoke at length about all that went into the photo sessions in the Mylar Chamber and the intensity of the experience for the person posing, hours on end in that mirror room watching their own image. For himself as photographer, being in the moment was especially delicate: “Sometimes an image would be there, and it would be something that would make you almost go mad to be able even to see such a thing with your eyes! Then you would want to photograph it, and if you weren’t quick enough there would be a slight vibration and the Mylar would ripple into some other shape.” In other words, he was almost constantly faced with a moving target, since what he saw continued to change in the act of looking. As he grew more familiar with the properties of the material and its effects, instinctively he had to develop some kind of new esthetic to recognize what he might be looking for, in all its wondrous dynamics. What he was on the trail of was “the metamorphic image,” in Allan Graubard’s words, “the image of a moment that surpasses itself.” Or as Alice Farley notes, in these photos he “allows us to see what is invisible. His use of the mirror is not a trick. It is a way in.”

The full historical context of the Mylar photos is laid out in Ian MacFadyen’s learned and illuminating essay “The Mercury Mirror.” Considering the breadth of cultural and intellectual currents at play there, we are better able to appreciate the implicit depths in Cohen’s work beyond our direct perception of the images. MacFadyen situates the Mylars in a lineage of apparitional or spirit photography, which goes back to the medium’s beginnings in the effort to reveal ghosts and other paranormal phenomena. He traces the use of mirrors, and the regard for their hidden powers, from the ancient Chinese and Greeks through to the Elizabethans and to 20th-century antecedents in film and multimedia experiments. The essay also investigates Cohen’s lifelong interest in esoteric spiritual practices alongside his fondness for elements of popular culture, notably Marvel Comics, all of which helped shape his sense of the Mylar pictures as “archetypal projections.” It is almost dizzying, the wealth of touchstones found in the Mylar photos; one has only to keep looking.
Pierre Senges's *Geometry In The Dust*, translated by Jacob Siefring with multiple illustrations by (Patrice) Killoffer, is the story of an imaginary city designed by two friends which takes on a life, a complexity, and, at times, a menace of its own. This remarkable
book, though totally its own creation and hardly cloistered within literary history, nonetheless suggested to me three other texts. The first is, Andre Breton’s *Nadja*, with its sense of the psychogeography of place, how a sense of specificity (not necessarily realistic depiction, or gazetteering) can conjure a mystical, interior drama. The second is St. John Perse’s *Anabase*, which in *vers libre* paeans depicts the movement of people and consciousness across the steppes. And the third is *The Thousand and One Nights*, not so much for its literary genre and structure—although this work has metafictional elements also present in *Geometry In The Dust*—but for the world of the imaginary city being—with certain key anachronistic exceptions—the world of the stories of Scheherazade, of Harun-al Rashid and an Islamic world that stretches from Gibraltar to Khorasan.

The book begins with a kind of choose your own adventure moment, as the first-person narrator fancies himself as the “minister” and “confidante” (11) of his friend, the “inheriting prince” of a vast realm. They continue in the book as “I” and “you,” although, as nearly always when the text posits a second-person addressee, there is a sense in which the “you” also includes the reader. This is especially so as the “I,” although placing itself under the suzerainty of the “you,” is the one who gives the “you” a sense of their kingdom, unfolding its story, again, as Scheherazade did for the Caliph. The goal of the two is “to build up a city, to see to its every last detail” (14). This phrase makes it clear that the city is one of the mind, but not just a phantasm or an eidolon. It has an uncanny presence, as for the desert dweller it is both utopia and dystopia, a land of the unknown but also an anti-paradise of the feared. The city is forever fragmentary, forever hypothetical. As vast and as premeditated as its conceptions, it can never be complete.

This is the point of the title: the geometrical conception of the city ends up in the dust; contingency or even a kind of aesthetic decay. But there is also a sense where there needs to be geometry before it goes into the dust, that the romance of the experience comes from the way conception must inevitably crumble into a “a *danse macabre* every day of the week” (59). There’s also a third sense where the title is saying, even in the dust, there is geometry, that, if order cannot be complete and is always ruptured by chaos, so
does chaos also contain its own internal geometry, a distinct shape and form. Killoffer’s illustrations, with swirling, anamorphic shapes and faces, their display of oddments within an overarching frame, and their clearly delineated contrast of black and white, add to this sense of form that is not order but not complete chaos either.

Importantly, the illustrations are generally of people, not of architectural spaces. They are almost like the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico in reverse; whereas the Italian painter limned scenes of ageless, depopulated cities, Killoffer’s illustrations are full of people, of faces, and are only occasionally architectural. The distorted, animated faces, though, are not just masses, but constituents of an implied city. That the city is never fully depicted contributes to its conjectural, hypothetical feel.

This is not just an illustrated book, but a book that has thought of itself as a physical object. The white spaces between the sections operate powerfully precisely because they mirror the idea of a cognitive blank slate on which the projections of the imagined city are layered. In addition, the book does not seem to be paginated until the end, where we are presented with the equivalent of a table of contents, with the first words of each of the book’s fourteen sections (perhaps modeled in a sonnet?) to the right of a page number. This gives the book a clean, uncluttered feeling in terms of design, but also makes the offbeat table of contents a kind of encryption key, even though there is no mystery and no solution. Inside the Castle has designed the book not just as a visual treat but as a text where pictures and empty spaces add to the sense of carnival and conundrum.

There are also occasionally embedded paragraphs of smaller-font text which look like glosses in old Bibles, and could be the “you” of the main narrative speaking back in first-person mode. The gloss-like elements include some of the book’s most emblematic passages, “One of our own proverbs tells us: the theorem of Thales is used to measure surfaces, but dust has a method unto itself” (111). The geometrical conception of Thales fail when applied to the interstitial material of dust; but, to go back to the point that dust is not the pure anthesis of geometry, dust itself has a method: it is not chaotic, not without order. That this paradigmatic statement is put in the rarely used gloss font makes it less paradigmatic, however, tucking it away
in the realm of the less-deliberate. Though not a sustained irresoluble dialogue like the Hegel/Genet strands of Derrida's *Glas*, the presence of the gloss font both summarizes and at times contradicts or rebukes the book's dominant first-person conceptual strand. The sum of the book's various unconventionalities of layout and organization is to make reading it a necessarily active and nimble process.

This sense of contradiction also applies to the material and political aspects of *Geometry In The Dust*. It would be easy to see this book's evocation of Arab and Islamic milieus as orientalist, or as continuing a particular tradition of French Orientalism stemming from the nineteenth century and well anatomized in works by Raymond Schwab and, more polemically, Edward Said. This would be a considerable mistake. The triangle of possible lineages mentioned above—Perse, *The Thousand and One Nights*, Breton—perhaps shows why. But an even more powerful reason is that the book, far from provincializing the medieval Arab/Islamic world, uses it to provincialize modernity. Indeed, most of the book seems projected into the past, with very few exceptions, like the mention of automobiles, or detective novels, or “dervishes in Constantinople” (59), which there would not have been until 1453. Or a point where “Spanish guitar” (45) is quickly corrected to Moorish guitar. The textual viewpoint cannot conceal its own anachronism, as it is a conjecture of two minds who are obviously in some sort of present day, but it pulls off the veil of illusion just enough to permit the reader to experience illusions and their concomitant pleasures.

The urban setting of this textual conjecture is also a ward against nostalgia, as any city has a sophistication and cosmopolitanism that makes it seem contemporary. When people say, as they do occasionally, that they feel more at home in the classical than the medieval past, this is basically what they mean, and Senges, by reminding us of Islamic urbanity, forestalls any exoticism. Equally though, the text does not romanticize cities or render them into dream-palaces. Poverty, inequality, anonymity, oppression—all the aspects of contemporary urban life that, at least until very recently, we tended to eulogize so much, are admitted, and Killoffer's illustrations depict a world that is nearly as much nightmare as dream.
The mention of “Menippean satire” (530) early on in the book may be the books’ self-diagnosis of its genre. Menippean satire, as a mix of playfulness, erudition, argumentation, and nonsense, if not exactly applicable to *The Geometry of Dust*, nevertheless does shed light on it, although the presence of illustrations perhaps rolls the text over to a new genre. Notably, though, this book, and Senges’ work in general, is not just about the display of erudition. There is much rumination on obscure arcana, but it is not simply a commonplace-book of quirky fragments. The narrative lets itself pour out into ecstasy or abandonment, does not become fixated on details or insights. In the past a certain sort of writer might have been able to harness a series of erudite observations into a compelling text by sheer bravura of style. But, with information now so available electronically, the aptitude of these collector-writers is now more dime a dozen. Moreover, erudition itself is now associated with a certain kind of (racial, gender, positional) privilege. Senges’s perspective, at once present and absent, learned but also prepared to take in a sense of reverie and astonishment and even delirium from worlds and illusions, is aware of these pitfalls, so that we can ride with its conjecture and not feel it too presumptuous.

Senges’s text is expertly and accessibly translated by Jacob Siefring. Siefring’s tone—not too stately and gravid, but not so bouncy as to diminish the sense of ‘as if’ and estrangement that characterize the text’s verbal performance—makes for an English that is both fluid and eloquent and permits us to imagine the French original. Siefring uses English colloquialism or paraphrases to give a sense of familiarity amid strangeness that heightens the text’s innate uncanniness: “Those old folks at home since forever ago might be powerful, unconcerned Gorgons—little does the length of time matter; but the idea of eternity is woven of a similar nostalgia” (37). The use of “gumption” on page 30 is a similar example. Just as Senges does not presume on his own erudition, Siefring renders the text not just in an English, but in something close to our own English. Translations, like imagined cities, have their own wayward geometry; and this translation of Senges gives the reader both the architecture of its daring and the pungent dust of the shy concourses of experience it deliriously renders.
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