



HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

Vol. XII, No. 1 (2019)

FEDERICO GORI

DANCE: SANNA KEKÄLÄINEN

SERGE PEY * ADONIS ON PEY
NEW POEMS BY MAURA DEL SERRA

FRITZ SENN ON JAMES JOYCE
JÓSEF J. FEKETE ON SZENTKUTHY

DURAS INTERVIEWS BATAILLE

STAN BRAKHAGE
CHRIS MARKER
& MORE

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



MAST HEAD

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FULGUR PRESS

Ira Cohen: Into the Mylar Chamber

Edited with text by Allan Graubard. Text by Ira Cohen, Timothy Baum, Ian MacFadyen, Alice Farley, Ira Landgarten, Thurston Moore.

Between 1968 and 1971, in a loft on New York's Jefferson Street, the poet, photographer and filmmaker Ira Cohen created some of the most mythic images of the late 1960s. Inspired by his friends Jack Smith and Bill Devore, Cohen's initial experiments with black light developed into an experimental ritual space he termed the Mylar Chamber — a simple room of hinged boards hung with reflective Mylar film.



Through his extended network, and with the support of artist and set designer Robert LaVigne, Cohen invited visitors to play another self within this small theater, among them Jimi Hendrix, William Burroughs, Vali Myers, Jack Smith, Angus MacLise, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Lionel Ziprin, Ching Ho Cheng, Petra Vogt, Charles Ludlam, John McLaughlin and the rock group Spirit.

In December 1969, in a summary of the past decade, *Life* magazine declared that “few came as close to explaining the euphoric distortions of hallucinogenics” as Cohen through his Mylar Chamber photographs, but the full story draws upon much deeper ideas surrounding identity and the power of the image.

This is the first book to explore Cohen's iconic Mylar Chamber photographs. Published on the 50th anniversary of the *Life* magazine feature, and with several gatefolds, it includes more than 70 images from this intensely creative period, each digitally restored from the original negatives by Cohen's friend and collaborator, Ira Landgarten. It also includes an interview with Cohen, excerpts from his poetry, critical writing from Allan Graubard and Ian

MacFadyen and further reflections from Timothy Baum, Alice Farley and Thurston Moore.

Ira Cohen was born in the Bronx in 1935. A countercultural renaissance man, Cohen made films, photographs and poetry, edited the magazine *Gnaoua* and authored *The Hashish Cookbook*. Cohen became well known for his 1968 movie using the Mylar technique, *The Invasion of Thunderbolt Pagoda*, soundtracked by Angus MacLise, the original drummer of the Velvet Underground. In 2008, Nina Zivancevic, writing in *NY Arts* magazine, described Cohen's life as "a sort of white magic produced by an alchemist who turned his back on the establishment in order to find God, art and poetry." He died in 2011.



William Burroughs and His Gilded Cobra

Featured image is reproduced from '*Ira Cohen: Into the Mylar Chamber*.'

PRAISE AND REVIEWS

The extensive text describes the creation of these stunning, unusually warped images, as well as delving into the connections Ira Cohen and the (often famous) guests who agreed to be photographed. Captivating and extraordinary, *Ira Cohen: Into the Mylar Chamber* is utterly unforgettable... *The Guardian*



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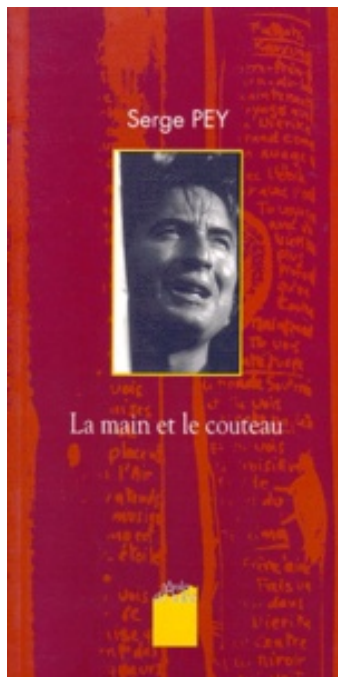
SERGE PEY

ALCHEMY OF THE VERB: PREFACE BY ADONIS

AROUND ATOMIC BIRDS: Interview with Thierry Renard

CHERNOBYL:

Oral Poem for the Men and Birds of the First Alarm



Excerpts from *Hand & Knife*¹
Translated by Yasser Elhariry

¹ Originally published in *La Main et le couteau, entretien avec Thierry Renard suivi d'un choix de textes inédits*, preface by Adonis (Vénissieux: Paroles d'Aube, 1997), pp. 5–44.

ALCHEMY OF THE VERB

PREFACE BY ADONIS

The Metaphor of the surge, allied to an alchemy of the verb, constitutes, it seems to me, the deep structure of Serge Pey's poetic sphere.

The first time I saw and heard him read his poetry, it was like he was crawling out of the very heart of nature, his song growing out of her arms. It's as if his voice transmuted each movement of his body into words, as if his body became speech. Zero separation between his body and his words: he possesses a different sort of eloquence, which proceeds forth from a secret concert of voice, gesture, and sign, directed by his body, itself orchestrated by the earth's imaginary—I would even say mystical—body. An eloquence typically ignored by books.

In the mystical view of the world, first there was speech between the creator and the created. The created knew nothing of the creator, save his voice, and in hearing it, rejoiced so much that he came to be. The pleasure of speech—and thus of voice, of song—is at the basis of being, and that is why song impels everyone who listens to movement, emotion, and excitement. This is the origin of passion for everyone who listens to song, this passion grants them access to their imperfections so that, armed with this knowledge, they may become more perfect.

A song that communicates no creative passion is no song at all.

Voice is tied to song (a voice in itself and above all else), and the universe is no more than song. The encounter between voice-speech and speech-song is the supreme instant of poetic expression, an instant of song bespeaking the indescribability of the world and of things.

With his words, Pey links voice to matter, as if poetry were the place where outside and inside might come to dissolve, where language and nature meet.

Pey's voice evokes the voices surging out of the throats of valleys and off the tops of mountains, and with the voice inside his voice, his poetry incarnates itself in a body that identifies with the universe. Pey's voice is demiurgic, shapes a language of fury out of creation, a language that dwells in a perpetual state of love, maintaining the mysteries all while naming them.

This is how Pey propels speech back to its origin—voice—that initial, constituent energy, the principal of the world's apparition.

Pey's poetry tells us that the relationship between man and his body is essentially tied to the relationship he maintains with the universe, and these relationships are integrated into one and the same surge. This way, the poem, whether read aloud or heard, is nothing if not a call to ecstasy, to immersion

in cosmic energy, it addresses the heart-flesh, this crucible of light, abolisher of thickness, wherever the ephemeral and the eternal, the manifest and the hidden, are interwoven.

Watch Pey's voice metamorphose into sticks,² where signs and lines are drawn, dressed in vibration; signs and lines that are walkways between the voice of humans and the voice of nature, destined to strike the rock of opacity, opening us up to the invisible.



² Adonis is referring to Serge Pey's practice of cutting and polishing walnut branches to produce wooden sticks on which he draws and writes his poems. See "L'écriture des bâtons," sergepey.fr/biographie. To view more of Pey's sticks: <http://sergepey.fr/media/batons/>





AROUND ATOMIC BIRDS

Thierry Renard Interviews Serge Pey

You write your poems on sticks. It's been said that you make poems out of twigs... In his journal, Charles Juliet evokes one of your sonorous sticks...

This stick is my old companion.³ I cannot imagine a poem recital without it. The stick that Juliet talks about is my definition of poetry. When I'm asked what poetry is, I say: take a bamboo shoot, put a labyrinth inside of it and a scattered handful of desert sand, then with the noise of the sand flowing inside the labyrinth, call the rain.

Writing is a walk. I write on sticks because we all walk a tightrope between words and things. It's about not falling. The stick continues to be the metaphor for my poem.

For the longest time, I wrote on tomato stakes. I was struck by a tragedy that unfurled before the West's very eyes. It had also moved Jean Genet. It was right in front of a camp entrance in Beirut that armed men, brandishing a tomato in their hands, stopped and interrogated everyone headed to the commissary. *What's the word for tomato?* Some answered *bandora*, others *banadoura*. Those who mispronounced it were shot. On the land that birthed the Bible, the same old story repeats itself. The shibboleth incident.⁴ How do you pronounce the word for green wheat?

So I chose what's been referred to as my tomato stakes in order to avenge the names of man and the tomato. I make bundles out of poems, which is also a way of saying that poetry is outside of literature, irreducible to literature. I plant them. I put them in circles. I create writing on the ground.

My stick is my most loyal companion. With it, I can fight, walk. It's a stick that allows me to both keep my balance and wage war with words.

The stick that Juliet talks about belongs to a tradition, I spin it quickly in front of my eyes, like a helix, or in cadence with my text, and this leads to the creation of a quasi-hypnotic movement by establishing a true *corps-à-corps* with the poem and retrieving its corporeal aspect, long gone missing.

I create a sort of mental hole that allows for the figuration of the passage that is the poet's work.

³ A possible reference to Georges Brassens's song "Auprès de mon arbre."

⁴ Book of Judges 12.

*You recite poems with your feet?*⁵

When I was a child, we were taught that poetry was feet and that verses in particular were made up of feet, that an alexandrine was composed of twelve feet, which was totally false! Which the majority of teachers continue to propagate with impunity because they only possess a bookish vision of oral poetry... They even count these false feet with their fingers!

Poetry is made with the foot, it measures time. Every poem is made with feet. The poet has a foot in his mouth.

When the poem moved on from corporeal diction with feet to enumeration by hand, that was the end of the oral side of poetry.

The foot's rhythm as it beats the ground creates a sonic page on which the poem will inscribe itself in its respiration.

What is poetry?

Poetry is a hole, the hole of a mouth, the hole of being, a hole that wants to bring words and things back together. The chasm that separates them nourishes the mystery of the poem. The poet signals, in the sense that he shouts out, summons the word and the thing on the page-mouth. For a fleeting moment, perhaps a vision, he succeeds in constructing a bridge over this chasm. And he traverses this bridge. The poet is the one who returns from the abyss and who is obliged to descend into the abyss and then resurface to construct this bridge... The poem founds the being who voices being.

Poetry is a place of celebration between the word and the thing. How to fill this chasm, how to intensify it, how to exceed it and at the same time find the thing and attempt the impossibility of reunifying the word with the thing? Poetry is this celebration of the impossible with the word, blended in with rhythm.

Poetry is what helps us live our presence in the world. Poetry is constitutive of life itself. It's the witness as mirror of future life. It's the only means by which man enters into osmosis with infinity and totality. It's the encounter of the speaking being with the immense circle of his own creation...

Poetry is the separation of language in language with language. People need to celebrate what founds them. Speech constitutes them... They speak. But this speech isn't communication... It is its opposite. Poetry is language's attempt to escape from language, to deploy it in a space where it will once and for all speak to itself, and sometimes maybe even create its own things.

⁵ "The original question is intended to be literal and not idiomatic: Pey rhythms some of his readings to the beat of his feet stomping the floor.

How did it all begin?

I believe that it always begins, ever since there were people. Poetry is biological; it's at the cellular level... But perhaps my consciousness of this beginning goes back to this one day we had tons of people over at home. Our table was too small and I saw my father grab the entrance door and put it on trestles. That day we didn't eat off a table but off a door. The dishes in front of me did something else other than feed us — they were passageways. We ate to pass, through the door. To understand is to pass. I cannot write a poem without knocking down some door.

Poetry came to me both through the exterior of language and its interior. To be a poet deep down is to want to access a language that would not be language. To want to access a language that explains the secret of the world, of creation. That's why poetry is itself founded on the secret of its unknown.

I find the beginning of the poem in everyday life, in quotidian gestures that are transformed into symbols and whose immense shock blasts sense out of speech, but with it. I gained consciousness of the poem's beginning when the mystery of symbolic creation took place before me.

Poetry is a symbolic reversal. And the secret of the love between the door and the table. It's the secret of home, which is to say the poem. In poetry, I'm always in search of this irruption of the real which language cannot create all on its own. And so, a poem made up only of language, with no symbolic irruption of the real, is no poem for me. Scrabble doesn't cut it for a poem. The masses of poems that belong to rhetorical arabesques have frequently reduced poetry to a game of wits and language.

Mallarmé?

Mallarmé is a great separator of language with language. He's a poet whose work should also be read along the lines of symbolic and esoteric initiation. What has always struck me is that the entire impulse of the avant-gardists and of artistic inseparability emerges out of the most sophisticated—and aristocratically most decadent—*œuvre* of the last century, in these baubles of sonorous inanities.

Mallarmé revendicates the gesture of the poem in the poem. His *Throw of the Dice* is written the same way we toss dice onto the counter. In the very arc of the throw. Mallarmé invents a new layout by crossing the arc of the tossed dice with café counters. The page of the poem becomes a counter...

In Notre Dame la Noire,⁶ you speak of 421?⁷

We share a throw of the dice in common with Mallarmé!

When I was writing *Notre Dame la Noire*, one night I found myself in front of a closed café in Toulouse. Behind the curtains I saw the few friends who were there, including the owner, playing 421. I went in through the backdoor and slipped in between the players, who welcomed me in their midst. They saw right away that I didn't know the rules of the game, so a woman who happened to be there decided to play for me. Whenever it was my turn, she grabbed the dice, lifted her dress, and in a gesture of sacred obscenity, violently rubbed them up against her vagina. Then tossed them out onto the counter. This gesture is the very gesture of the poem.

The irruption of the real is important for you, and indissociable from an experience of language...

Allen Ginsberg has this awesome expression for designating the poem's reality, which he ascribes to the American Objectivists: a *reality sandwich*. The difference between surrealist poetry with its word sandwiches and American poetry is massive... For instance, how could I evoke the sea without associating it with the concentration camp where my folks were locked up after the Spanish Civil War... One day I was with my father in front of the sea, at Argelès. Just as I was about to reach out and touch the waves gnawing at my feet, my father held me back with his arm and said: "Here, you see, we were locked up behind barb wire, and every morning there were thousands of us shitting out our dysentery in front of the French army, and it was the sea that wiped our ass..." I cannot not also see the sea as a shithouse for Spanish anarchists. Everyone has the toilet they deserve. The reality of this image doesn't belong to language. Next to the Spanish anarchist's ass shitting in the sand, right next to it I found my first starfish and saw my first sunrise.

If American poetry — especially the Beat Generation — is more popular than French poetry, that's because it never cut itself off from a description of reality. Poetry is made with words but also with the real, with the words of literature, but also spoken words, the epic daily life of man.

⁶ Serge Pey, *Notre Dame la Noire : ou l'Évangile du serpent*, tr. from the Occitan by Éric Fraj (Toulouse: Tribu, 1988).

⁷ 421 is a popular French dice game often played at bar counters. Players take turn tossing three dice. Combinations are attributed different values, ranging from highest (421 or *quatre-vingt-et-un*) to lowest (221 or *ninette*).'

Poetry and movement. Something immense, decisive, in your dissertation, The Torn-Out Tongue,⁸ you talk about the complex relationships that poetry sustains with ritual...

There's a myth that I like interpreting in the poem's favor, and which I place at the origins of poetry. It's the story of the Athenian king Pandion, who had two daughters, one named Procne, the other Philomela, which means "who loves to sing." I'm going to tell you the story:

The barbarians wanted to seize the city, so old king Pandion called upon Tereus, king of neighboring Thrace, to come to his side.

The war was bloody but the alliance was victorious, and as a reward Tereus obtained from the old king his daughter Procne's hand... The king's two daughters, raised together since birth, were inseparable. Procne's departure was just as devastating for the two sisters, and both remained inconsolable in their grief... Tereus and Procne's union was consecrated by the birth of their son Itys. Despite the joy of this birth, Procne asked her husband to go fetch her sister and bring her to the palace... Obliging his wife's wishes, Tereus traverses the mountains and goes off in search of Philomela. During the journey, he falls for her. But she remains true to her sister, yields not to his love. So, faced with this refusal, he rapes her and chains her by the arms to a wood cabin, in the forest's deepest corner, and lest she unveil his secret, Tereus tears out her tongue.

Upon returning to the Palace, Tereus lies and tells Procne that her sister died in an accident during the journey... Procne, in the grips of sorrow, builds a sepulcher that will remain forever empty, in wait of the discovery of her sister's body.

In the meantime, still tied to the cabin beams, Philomela manages to weave, with her tongueless mouth, a tapestry recounting her tragedy and denouncing the crime.

The history of poetry is at play here. We are all Philomela.

A myth of poetry or poetry as myth?

The myth of Philomela is the myth of poetry. Framed in its tragic breadth, it reflects the infinity of supreme interrogation. Here, being and its song...; there, being and its story... The legend of Philomela is the very metaphor of

⁸ Serge Pey, *La Langue arrachée ou la poésie orale d'action : essai d'analyse et d'histoire de l'oralité dans le poème à la fin du XX^e siècle* (Université Toulouse, 1995).

the poem, and illustrates its original drama by establishing human beings' desire for language,⁹ their search for their tongue while simultaneously inventing it... It pleases me to see in this legend the history of poetry. Philomela, "who loves to sing," is poetry cut off from its tongue. The torn-out tongue is the secret of the written poem.

Philomela puts the problem of poetry's situation in written and oral terms. She who no longer sings fabricates a text (a fabric with her language) that recounts her story... The text is the fabric. It's with the absence of the tongue that she creates the poem's writing... Text and tapestry reference the thread's shared etymology.

The fabric of Philomela's story is the text separated from her voice, which recounts the poem's tragedy. The text comes out of her empty mouth and thus replaces language. It slips away like the mouth's infinite new tongue.

The myth of Philomela tells us that symbolically every text is a cut-out tongue and writes itself in that tongue.

The head presented by Philomela to her rapist is the head of poetry.

You're known as an oral poet and you inflect the poem toward orality; how do you conceive of the relations between writing and orality?

To separate the written from the oral is to not understand the poem. There is no anterior poetic orality that precedes the written poem, with writing only coming in second. The poet founds the poem's writing and orality at the same time. Even historically. I've seen shaman artists write or comment on signs while they were singing a poem. The poem is a ritual space founded by man where mouth and hand are closely mixed in rhythm.

When we read a text, we read on a torn-out tongue.

And to read a poem is to never forget that a tongue was cut in a mouth.

Written poetry is a torn-out tongue that resuscitates language...

This torn-out tongue that the poem is inscribed on will give way to reading in the recollective tension of the empty mouth that birthed it. The desire for poetry is the return to this fabric of eloquence, like a tongue reinserted into a mouth so that poetry can rediscover its unity. A text is always a memory of a mouth, of the drama of a mouth that lingers in the impossibility of saying what it saw.

The mouth, no longer capable of talking with its tongue, will henceforth produce text by giving birth to the fabric of the story.

⁹ The French word *langue* designates both "language" and "tongue," and the meaning in this passage is deliberately polyvalent, since Philomela's tongue is as in question as the linguistic nature of poetry and poetics.

All writing recounts on its unconscious page the drama of the torn-out tongue.

So poetry continues to be tortured between its writing and its orality. How to read with a mouth but no tongue? How to create this fabric with the mouth? How to re sew the tongue back in?

The fabric that comes out of Philomela's mouth is a new tongue that speaks without speaking and that needs eyes to be heard and ears to be seen.

My friend Guy Claverie tells me that symbolically the text is a tongue that never stops growing, like a lizard's tail, which we cut with the teeth of signs or the alphabet. The text is the infinitely deployed desire for the tongue. It is also an infinite tongue, but it cannot stop at founding the present of its speech. Orality is in this way a way of temporarily immobilizing this infinity.

A tragedy?

A tragedy is at the origins of writing. That's the drama of its separation from its mouth. The torn-out tongue creates the sign, and the mouth that makes the sign can only scream. It's the pain of the written poem. Every poem lives out the pain of being torn apart and the desire of returning to the mouth that breathed it. Isn't this gap also the difference between word and thing? The enormous gap of the scream opened up by separation.

The text always wants to re become the tongue that, symbolically speaking, it once was. But the text knows that it will never be this tongue. The text knows that it cannot make sounds and that it will be mute for all eternity, that it will be the sign of the mouth.

But the text recalls the mouth that made it and sang its rape.

The sign is borne of the interdiction to recount the violation of speech. Poetry's melancholia is this stain burning on the forehead. The one forbidding its foundation.

The myth of Philomela tells us that the foundation of writing lays upon a castration.

When Tereus lies and tells his wife that her sister died in an accident, his speech is no speech at all... Only poetry is the speech of truth... When Procne liberates her sister Philomela after having read the tapestry woven by her mouth, vengeance becomes true speech over false speech. The two sisters feed a child to Tereus. His own. This child is speech. It's the speech of the poem. For the poem is separated from the common tongue that can say whatever it wants.

Poetry doesn't lie, and the vengeance of true speech is implacable against false speech. This way, the written also becomes the truth: true speech against Tereus's lying mouth...

Every read poem is a torn-out tongue. And whoever's reading rediscovers a tongue cut by the book. He must search inside himself for the wolves who have eaten his tongue. He must bust their guts open to recuperate it...

To read a poem is to forever relive Philomela's drama, then insert the poem in her mouth. Isn't reading aloud resewing her tongue?

Every written poem carries within it the memory of a torn-out tongue, which it retells in-between its lines... And so we only ever read the ripping out of the tongue with our eyes, and the text that replaces the tongue constantly seeks return back into the mouth, by folding itself and becoming tongue anew, unfolding in its flesh... A tongue of flesh and a tongue of paper... The whole history of the poem, in-between writing and orality, lies in this respiration... The text returns to the mouth like a child to his mother's breast...

The mouth is the mother of the torn-out sign, and its teeth are the letters of the alphabet that it invents... The tongueless mouth is the night whose *teeth-letters* are the stars.

You put out a record with Allen Ginsberg.¹⁰ Richard Martel says that you're the West's only oral poet... What's orality today?

The mouth no longer has the tongue to say words. The tongueless mouth can only sing.

So all singing is alone without a tongue. Sometimes wordless poetry also sounds out Philomela's black scream in the sky. Like Chopin's.

Orality today relies on texts. The oral poet resews his tongue back into his mouth upon these graves... Oralized poetry, which relies on writing, is merely an exercise in reading. It's an attempt and the only means of materializing the junction between word and things. For a minute, the embodied text goes mad by whipping the body into a frenzy. Even if poetry is counter-hysterical, as Henri Meschonnic says, in the sense that the poem is full of bodies. The practice of orality demonstrates that oral language can become hysterical.

What's oral stays ephemeral, improvised, and cannot be studied. Only cadavers can be studied. Dissection is easier with a dead body. Poetry specialists are generally archeologists of funerary inscriptions. All you've got to do is look at the scandalous reception that was dished out to Meschonnic's work, which examines the life of the poem and the theory of rhythm... Orality continues to be the pleasure of the embodied text.

I love American poetry because it does not carry the same academic guilt as in France.

¹⁰ The recording of Ginsberg's performance in Toulouse may be streamed on Pey's website at sergepey.fr/media/howl.

Your conception of poetic writing is not reduced to an alphabetic system...

The *tongue-fabric* of poetry must reinvent itself as a new tongue. The poet is a weaver of himself: he weaves the text in the name of his missing tongue and stitches this text back into his mouth in order to speak.

The poet is a weaver of being. By weaving the poem, he's constantly recounting the origin of his weave. Threads come out of his teeth and touch things.

Philomela, "who loves to sing," is the symbol of poetry slipping away from song and becoming mute writing.

It is therefore necessary to rip out the tongue of speech in order for writing, which tells and retells, to appear.

She who sang speech has no more than a song with no words. Wouldn't singing also be the possibility of speech?

Philomela suffers the same way as Atlas holding up the world. She tells us where writing comes out from. The song of lost orality against the field of writing. Or both at the same time: the one sowing the other in its infinite matrix...

Poetry ceaselessly searches for its mouth by holding its tongue like a sonorous compass in a quest for reunified speech...

The poet stands up straight with his mouth open, he's holding a tongue in his hands and he's trying to make it speak by inserting it between his teeth. To make the raped poem speak, that's the work of the poet-weaver of words. All poets rip out their tongues out of the poem to make a poem. And all poets eat their tongues so as to sing with their mouths once again...

Lips and books share the same hole and the same teeth. For a mouth with no tongue is no longer a mouth... It's around this hole that poetry will say and rewrite itself. Like an eternally black well traversed by the shooting star of the sign that's always coming back to tear out our tongue and stitch it back in. To remind us...

The verse is the thread of the tongue that the poet resews back into his mouth. The pencil is the impossible needle of this stitch in meaning and blood... Poetry is simultaneously the tongue, the loss of the tongue, and the return of the tongue back into the open mouth and back into the shut mouth. There is no before in the poem, there is no after. There's always a tongue that we rip out and re sew.

Hidden behind the history of alphabets and all writing are speech and act, united in their destiny. Writing is the act of speech, of the tongue with no mouth that wants to return to the mouth. The poet needs his hand to re sew the tongue. The gesturality of the poem in its orality is the dance of this "to re sew."

The sign?

The blank tombstone,¹¹ which Procne constructs for her sister with the torn-out tongue, is for the poem.

The tombstone calls out to us and stops us. The Greek sign, that's the *sema* of the funerary stone... In the *Odyssey*, Homer uses the expression *sema cheein*¹² for *erect a tombstone*. Isn't this tombstone also the mouth emptied of its poem by writing?

Here, like a flag of death, this *sema* is the tongue that floats upon the tomb that Procne ordered to have constructed for her sister.

The open mouth of the tongueless tomb. Someone is missing and the *sema* signals it. The blank tombstone flags us down...

Entombed, the poet's gone missing. And the tomb is this mouth of shadows that signals the poem's true death to us, should it never return to its true mouth...

In the mouth of death, the poet's gone missing...

But here the tombstone is emptied of Philomela. It's this blank tombstone that calls out to us. The empty *sema* that's signposting the tombstone is the sign by which we recognize it. Is the poem this infinite *sema*? And yet this *sema* is there, as though separated from the other part of itself. Like its sex, all alone. The tongue wants to return and consummate its marriage with the mouth in the wedlock of the poem...

This is how we should understand the Greek play on words between sign and death. *Soma-seme*. The tombstone is for the mouth, and the sign is the tongue that floats upon the tomb then returns like a swallow to the mouth of the living. From the mouth of death to the mouth of the living, a poem stretches its thread to the swallow's foot. And, paradoxically, the more the poem's writing is written, the more we pave the way to public reading. Orality is not oral writing, rather the revindication of the oral side of all written texts. A poem contains its orality just as much as its writing. It's the interplay of the one in the other that founds the poem. It's just as wrong for me to write for reading as it is to write for silence. The poem remains impossible without its two footings: the foot of its orality and the foot of its writing, which are brought about at the same time ...

¹¹ Fr. *tombeau*, also a poetic genre memorialized by Mallarmé, who wrote *tombeaus* for Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Paul Verlaine, as well the posthumous *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole*. See Jean-Luc Nancy, "Afterword: Three Questions About *Tombeau of Ibn Arabi*," in Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Tombeau of Ibn Arabi and White Traverses*, tr. by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 109–15.

¹² On *sema* and *sema cheein*, see Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Reading" Greek Death: *To the End of the Classical Period* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 132.

With the reign of capital at the end of this century, at a time when poets have become clandestine, is poetry lost speech?

I believe so... Poetry is always this kind of lost speech, forever rediscovered, but which comes from the future because it very often founds the most extreme present.

Tereus the tongue-ripper is rhythm. Through his act of symbolic cruelty, he founds the writing of the poem and its shattered suffering in-between the eye that sees and the mouth that says. Tereus is the founder of the movement of the infinite return between verse and tongue... The tongueless mouth is an eye that we give to the other for him to see what the mouth cannot usually say...

The myth of Philomela tells us about the weaving that happens with a tongueless mouth and not about weaving borne of hands. To weave without hands is to weave speech that says the poem. It is writing.

This way, writing exits the mouth for the duration of history's time. Penelope, mute in the face of absence, weaves so that she doesn't have to speak, then erases her poem every night...

It's actually Penelope who writes the *Odyssey*, not Homer... Penelope's weaving is the very writing of the poem recited by Homer... Homer is no more than the reciter of Penelope's poetry... Poetry will never be lost... Her weaving is the very thread of our life... She weaves the thread of being.

So poetry is a symbolic act, does it imply ritual, as in your own practice, when you read in public?

Poetry's forever founding a symbolic act. To write a poem is to live Philomela's ritual. Writing with the mouth, not with hands. The ritual is a way of living and perpetuating the myth...

The poem is the reunion of two signs, its orality and its writing. All action is writing. All speech lives with its act.

When Philomela becomes a swallow to escape her rapist's vengeance, she's also the figuration of utopia and the speed-scream of this tension. The tongue lifted out of the mouth that wants to return to the mouth. It's this ritual game that founds the poem...

Poetry teaches us that man is an entire sign, unseparated, that the sign of the tongue resembles him...

The history of poetry is the history of the tongue as a groove¹³ in the field singing the poem's comings and goings... The poet carries and fulfills the action of this return, and his poetry is the mimed rite of the poem.

The swallow, which Philomela becomes in order to escape Tereus's vengeance, is a cut tongue that, while grazing us, screams into the infinity of the sky like cold scissors... The swallow is a word.

Through the fracture where words and things drift and unite, the poet watches his tongue constantly passing, flying through the bloody hole where his poem gushes out... Standing over the cliff of the book with his black mouth, he tries to grasp and bite it so he can finally speak.

Writer or poet?

The poet is the one who separates language from its daily usage. In the immense field of the language of communication, of power, of capital, he draws out another space, a rite of separation. A writer... why not, since I do write, but a poet in function, since poetry blows up literature, it reaches into the visual arts¹⁴ and the arts of writing as much as life. It can be an art of life. The contemporary definition of poetry is reductive. The poet is not just someone who puts words into verse.

The poet is someone who invents the poem's meaning every single time, who overloads the meaning that integrates life and overloads it. Poetry is also an art of living that overloads literature, and, sometimes, pulls off trying to live life as an art. Robert Filliou is one of the most important living poets of my generation. He's got a venture for curing poetry of its rhetoric illness, like Marcel Duchamp.

You are a performing poet, we see you with your friends from Polyphonix, with Julien Blaine, John Giorno, Bernard Heidsieck, Jean-Pierre Verreghen, and Joël Hubaut. You cover birds with salt for Chernobyl... You enact visual haikus with 90 pounds of tomatoes in Tokyo... You read your poems in public with Ginsberg. Many musicians have accompanied you...

I don't like that word, performance. I prefer to call what I do *attack*, *ritual*, or *situation*. The gesture is the third part contained by the poem. This aspect is totally overlooked. For the poem has a gesture. Every poem contains within

¹³ Fr. *sillon*, which also means "furrow." I have opted for "groove" in keeping with Jacques Rancière, *Le Sillon du poème: en lisant Philippe Beck* (Caen: Nous, 2016); *The Groove of the Poem: Reading Philippe Beck*, tr. by Drew S. Burk (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2016). On vinyl grooves, hit songs, sonic hauntings, and the circulation of capital, see Peter Szendy, *Tubes: la philosophie dans le juke-box* (Paris: Minuit, 2008).

¹⁴ Fr. *arts plastiques*.

itself a ritual seed. A metaphor or an image can be this seed, and propositions for corporeal displacements will irradiate out of it.

The performance of orality passes through the mouth and the foot. The poem is read with feet. Orality passes through dance. It's the entire body that goes for the ephemeral—but possible—reunification of the word with things. Only this act could reunite them in its own mystery... The poetry that in the West today has become a purely mental activity tends to reconquer its corporeal activity, and at the end of this century we've perhaps arrived at the junction of poetry's dual aspect. The poetry of law and order would be the one found in the writing of frozen letters described by Rabelais.¹⁵ But outlaw poetry, outside of this law, carries itself like a witness of its own time.

Performance is also an inscription of poetry in the general frame of blowing up all of the arts. The end of the century is returning to poetry unseparated from its magnificent, archaic beginnings. I am a poet who dances, who writes, and my sticks are poems-sculptures. To be a poet is surely to push back against the limits placed on the definition of the poet.

Do you have a definition for modernity?

What interests me is not modernity but the present. Modernity is a term that belongs to the vocabulary of commerce and signifies the new. Henri Meschonnic has shown this.¹⁶ Rimbaud doesn't care for modernity and opposes it.¹⁷ What interests us is the unknown. Coming up with something new is the ideology of the reign of capital, which has made its way into art's vocabulary. Today, we needn't make the new but the unknown, which, paradoxically speaking, is the present. Nor is modernity youth. To see the signs of man behind whatever is obscured by the dominant language of capital. The unknown sometimes relieves the present and not the future of signs, sometimes it's rediscovering the farthest past.

Familiar faraways?

Familiar faraways belong to familiar nearbys. How to go from door to table? How to see? I set a lot of my poems in front of a window or sink. How can I release an arrow in the water while calculating the angle of entry...

¹⁵ On Rabelais' *parolles gelées* or "frozen words" in the *Quart livre*, see Michel Chion, *Le Son : ouïr, écouter, observer* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2018) 38–39; *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise*, tr. by James A. Steintrager (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) 30–31.

¹⁶ Henri Meschonnic, *Modernité, modernité* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1988).

¹⁷ Pey expounds his view of Rimbaud in the essay "Le nom-extrême ou le secret d'Arthur Rimbaud" [The Name-Extreme or Rimbaud's Secret], appended to the end of *La Main et le couteau*, pp. 101–11.

The most familiar faraway is that of my name, which explains my work on peyote. The familiar faraway is always nearby.

The faraway is there like strangeness. It is far and near at the same time. Actually, it is in itself.

Do your travels among the Wixáritari, which you've relayed on France Culture with René Farabet, partake of this past? Did the Wixáritari call you Yautahupa...?

The poet isn't just someone who writes pretty poems or practices an artisanal form of writing. The poet is a founder of speech and gesture, a discoverer, though words, of the unknown. But if it's just words creating the poem, then they cease to be words. The unknown must torment language. What interested me in the Wixáritari shamanic arts was this practice that consists of looking through matter and boring a hole with what they call a *nierika*.¹⁸ The shaman's gaze fills his language.

Mexico is one of my familiar faraways. The poet is a harmonizer of forces, just like the shaman. Funambulist, tight-rope walker, cook, mason of images-forces that he goes about saying and living.

My familiar faraway isn't geographical and it belongs to no compass pointing the way... The quest for being and all that can live the astonishment of its unknown is no stranger to the poem. For me, even if Mexico was living nourishment for my poetry, I know that poetry has no country.

There isn't a rupture between the poem and life. That's the meaning of my encounter with the Wixáritari and with peyote, a part of which I carry in my name, and which I have always taken in ritual fashion. The poem is also an exploration of the unconscious, and, in its oral practice, an attempt of ascending to superconsciousness...

There's no such thing as national poetry. We're of the generation that was on the ground blowing up both the frontiers of art and national frontiers. If

¹⁸ Hope MacLean explains in *The Shaman's Mirror: Visionary Art of the Huichol* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) that "the word 'nierika' is derived from *niere*, 'to see,' and *ka*, 'habitual' [...]. It suggests the ongoing ability to achieve vision [...] nierika is a tool for achieving shaman vision as well as a representation of visionary experience" (42). *Nierika* may resemble "the idea of a doorway in the mind that humans enter after death" (46) as well as represent "the face of the gods that a person sees when looking into a shaman's mirror. Once the person has seen the face of the gods, he or she carries that face in the mind" (46). While *nierika* may also be variously understood as mirror, prayer, and the vision itself (46–47), in terms of Pey's understanding of the concept as *hole*, MacLean offers the following helpful gloss: "Clearly, a *nierika* is linked to the idea of faces and eyes, and the depiction of these features. The mirror reflects the face and eye and is, in a way, a depiction of the face, so it too is a *nierika*. The hole in an object is a means of seeing through it, and the eyes of the seer look through it. The ability to see can be two-way, since the eye of a god can look at humans, but a human's eye can also look at a god" (56).

such a thing as “French” poetry unfortunately still exists today, it belongs to poetry’s ass. Poetry doesn’t go *cocorico*. The contemporary poet who like me writes in French is closer to Spanish poetry, the Beat Generation, the ancient Chinese, the rhythms of primitive poetry and to Polish poets than Pléiade poet-coppers like Pontus de Thiard.

You’ve been translated into Arabic by Adonis. We know about the friendship that bonds you to Abdellatif Laâbi. Is there a fraternity between you and Arab poets...?

History often united us. When I was running the review *Émeute* [Riot], I dedicated an issue in 1975 to Palestinian poetry. I read “les singes électroniques” [electronic monkeys] by Abdellatif Laâbi,¹⁹ then imprisoned in Morocco. Adonis, who translated me for his review [*Mawāqif*], courageously prefaced my book, *Dieu est un chien dans les arbres* [God is a Dog in the Trees].²⁰ Moncef Ghanem, A. Chawki, Jabbar, Jamel Bencheir, Arab poets are my brothers in poetry. Even my sticks partly come out of a story with the Arab world. I’m thinking of the recitals that I performed with Ahmed-ben-Dib or Michel Raji, *Soufi* and *Derviche*.

But I have just as many brothers in the Jewish world, like Moche-ben-Shéol, my Israeli translator, or Michel Elial Eckard.

There is no national poetry. Poets have no homeland. The foundations of their homes are exile itself. Not exile from language but from meaning. The poet fights for meaning. Poets throughout the world found an invisible republic, which, in the framework of these immense encounters, participates in the possible witnessing of another way of living in the world.

But to live in the world begins with the everyday. In one’s way of giving a kiss or death to everyday things. Poetry’s message today is exemplary. The poet must be a resistant. The defense of poetry is the defense of all of man. I’m thinking of the Italian poet Alberto Masala.

Poetry seems to be a total quest for you...

Poetry is not a linguistic game. It is a total quest for being.

If there is play, it must develop an inward gaze and signal without fail to the other, the unknown in the midst of the most banal. The poem’s writing allows us to consider things like mirrors, where words constantly reflect a new real. The word will force out the real, put a hole in it to see, or the real

¹⁹ Abdellatif Laâbi, “les singes électroniques,” *Souffles*, No. 16–17 (1969–70), lehman.cuny.edu/deanhum/langlit/french/souffles/S1617/0_1.HTM.

²⁰ Serge Pey, *Dieu est un chien dans les arbres*, preface by Adonis (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1993).

will put a hole in words to see. It's this encounter that founds the poem. *Dark Night of the Soul* by John of the Cross, or Angelus Silesius's *Cherubinic Pilgrim* belong to these dialectics. I read poems while turning around like Saint Teresa of Ávila...

What is what you search and have not yet found situated?

To be a poet is to draw infinity closer and to push it away at the same time. It's summoning infinity around the morning table between bread and a knife or the linens hanging out on the line. In the most eminently simple. The poet is a finder. His craft is finding the sources of being and reunifying words with things by outdoing words and things, by inventing the language of silence... The troubadour is a finder.²¹

Poetry finds its language. The poem is both what we find and the tool with which we find it. Maybe the poet only ever finds death, because to become a poet you must die many times over.

When I was a kid I looked for treasures in the Garonne. The particularity of the poem is that it's always kicking the treasure downstream... I believe that the poem finds being like wood takes to fire.

Men and women accompany you...

The dead, a lot of dead, because they are beneath the ground and they hold our feet up for us so we can stand up straight. Li Po, John of the Cross, Artaud, Pessoa, Dufrêne, whose voice I still hear ringing inside of me. Julian Beck, John Cage, Ghérasim Luca... The dead are the living of my poems. They are reborn in me. It seems to me that I am birthing one of them everyday on my lips. Men and women who accompany me come from the future.

Christine who has stars in her words, Georges the frame-maker, Guy, Valentin, Bernard, Le Pelec, the seamstress, the electrician, the fisher, my uncle who was a knife-sharpener, or mattress-maker... They're the ones who make me discover poetry.

You evoke your father in your poems...

My father accompanies me in my poem because he pulled off the symbolic reversal of the door and the table upon which I base my poetics, my artistic

²¹ Pey is punning the words *troubadour* [Occitan *trobador*] and *trouveur* [Northern French *trouvère*], literally "a person who discovers something, fortuitously or otherwise," "a person who invents, through an effort of the mind, imagination, or thanks to a happy inspiration" (*Trésor de la langue française*).

action, as a performer, that is, the corporeal brimming-over of the poem. Also, an image of my mother, her mouth full of needles, sewing.

The men and women who accompany me are the musicians of a vast, fabulous opera. They're the humble people who made me write my poem. That's why I like comparing the poet's work to a mason or baker or fisher's craft.

You direct a poetry workshop at the university of Toulouse and you organize neighborhood gatherings.

Our ancestors the troubadours went from court of love to court of love saying²² their poems. Today we must reinvent new castles. But castles inside ourselves. We've destroyed the castles of oppression and upon their ruins we've built castles of the heart. And so, for several years now, I've been going about reading my poems and inviting friends to the projects. Our hosts invite their friends and neighbors over, and suddenly we're forty squeezed around a meal that they'd prepared while we read our poems in the middle of all the bottles making the rounds. Poetry passes through this clandestine intimacy. Today, alternative places for the expression of poetry are the only ones left for the poem's expression. I'm thinking of *Caméléon* at Besançon or other gatherings organized by Yvon Le Men in Brittany.

Even if the University is made for the dissection of verse like a cadaver on an operating table,²³ and although the academy prefers studying dead over living creation, it remains one of the essential places of freedom to be defended in the West. It's the university at Mirail²⁴ that has allowed me to start Continents de la parole [Speech Continents] and the Bibliothèque orale de poésie contemporaine [Oral Library of Contemporary Poetry]. Poetry research isn't incompatible with the invention of the poem. All poems are theories in liberty.

²² Here as throughout the interview, Pey uses the French expression *dire la poésie* (literally, "to say poetry"). I have rendered this as "to read poetry" thus far, but here I have opted for the less idiomatic "saying their poems" to stress the orality of the troubadours, who performed and sang rather than read. See *Dire la poésie ?*, ed. by Jean-François Puff (Nantes: Cécile Defaut, 2015).

²³ An ironic reference to Lautréamont's famous line, "beau comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie" [beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella].

²⁴ The Toulouse neighborhood that, in local parlance, affectionately and metonymically gives its name to the arts campus of the Université Toulouse, renamed the Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès in 2014.

As an interior being and social individual, you've fought against the Chilean dictatorship with your poems, you've read against nuclear arms, you've published poems in support of assassinated Algerian intellectuals,²⁵ you were among the first to campaign for Václav Havel, for your support of Salman Rushdie you've been targeted by several political communiqués threatening you with death. This year all of your public appearances are dedicated to the Chiapas conflict...

The reasons to hope and fight for a more just world are inside man... There is no committed or uncommitted poetry. A certain strain of French poetry is dead of the rupture with its people and therefore the rupture with their words. French poetry is frequently clean poetry, unlike American poetry, which is dirty poetry. Its massive absence of orality brings it closer to art, funerary art, in the sense that its beauty is like an inscription on marble, like a Table of the Law. Orality on the other hand is filthy, inventive, ephemeral, and improvised. We cannot separate these two aspects, as practiced by André Velter and Jean-Luc Datisse, for example.

Placing poetry in an emancipatory discourse doesn't break the poem.

Is French poetry dying of its separation from its people? Are there even any people? Must we recreate people through speech?

I don't write denunciatory poems or calls to arms. But in general, I place my meditative poems or metaphysically inspired ones alongside those with whom I sometimes share a battle. I don't do tracts, but the poet is a witness. I'm no deserter, even though in the battle for human dignity I bear my own desert, for the goal of poetry remains poetry that ceaselessly invents its own infinity.

Atomic birds?

The atomic birds of Chernobyl are an attempt at this, like my work in Occitan and French around the Cathar genocide.

Which isn't at all to say prostituting writing for its accessibility. Everyone is capable in those moments of extremity and urgency to understand a poem's extremity.

Poetry is a battle for meaning and not just a commentary on the beauty of landscapes. Poetry is everything all the time. I find old Antonio whom

²⁵ Serge Pey, *Interrogatoire : poème pour les assassins de Tahar Djaout, Rabah Zenati, Abdelhamid Benmenni Ammi Marengo Saad Bakhtaou Abderrahmane Chergou Djamel Bouhidel Mustapha Abada Smaïl Yefsah Mustapha Saddouki Hamoud Hambli Rabah Guenzent Laadi Flici Mahfoud Boucebci Djilali Belkhenchir Abdelkader Alloula et les autres...* (Marseille: cipM, 1995).

Subcomandante Marcos speaks about a poet, or at least he possesses the poetry lacking in certain poems in literature.

The battle for poetry is a battle for meaning, and, I will add, not for the future but always for more of the present. The more present there is, the more time is undone... The poem persists as an offering that stops time.

The poet is a resistant and an opener unto meaning, guardian and destroyer of meaning. The struggle doesn't make the poem but to defend poetry today is to defend man. The clean-handed poem in the name of a theory of art cannot shy away from this century's great debates. The honor and dishonor of poets is yet one more way of placing this debate in a binary role. Between good and evil. God and the devil. Poetry in this view is above good and evil. The poem is free of its present... Writing for its future is forever writing for its present.

*What of the poems in this collection?*²⁶

The poems presented here come out of two sets of sticks or in different ways, the first sticks belong to a meditation, everyday poetry like a journal, a poetry of reflection and aphorism, *Hand & Knife* is a deployment of the silent way of the poem. The orality of the hand and knife belong to a harmonic claim.

Chernobyl, or, The Atomic Birds, included in this collection, is a poem where orality leads to the out-of-body. The anaphoric system of the writing itself drives the reader to the cadence. Broken off from the elocution of the Morse text to the point of suffocation. It's a text based on rhythm but whose writing is close to a metaphysical exploration of creation and the future of man. The text's refrain is written in a coded language, the one with which the catastrophe was announced.²⁷

This poem is an evocation of the radioactive ducks that developed in the hundreds of thousands and traversed Europe to go settle in Africa.

²⁶ Serge Pey, *La Main et le couteau : bâtons, janvier 1982-décembre 1995*, in *La Main et le couteau*, pp. 47-99. The headnote to the collection specifies that "this collection belongs to an ensemble of sticks written between 1983 and 1995, composed for the most part in Toulouse, but also in Santiago in Chile and in Mexico. Most are poems excerpted from inscribed and dedicated sticks. The numbering of these thirty-seven sticks — a scattered, unfinished bundle — follows the numbering in *La Définition de l'aigle : photographies du paysage* [Eagle Definition: Landscape Photographs] (Remoulins-sur-Gardon: Jacques Brémond, 1987), *La Mère du cercle* [Circle Mother] (*Travers*, n° 48, 1994), and *Dieu est un chien dans les arbres* [God is a Dog in the Trees] (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1993)" p. 47.

²⁷ The original layout of the poem in the collection presents three columns of equal width; from left to right: a repetitive list of the NATO phonetic alphabet sequenced according to Serge Pey's own logic; Pey's anaphoric poem formatted as a table; and a text in Morse code. Presented in English translation here is the second column containing Pey's poem.

It's a meditation on flight and the relationship that man can entertain with flight...

My poetry is poetry of the everyday. The quotidian: the flower bouquet, the sink, the house, the window, the dog are a lesson at any time. I cannot imagine poetry made up with words only, nor without them. Language made of words alone is good for nothing except for tossing to the sewer. You've got to be two to make a poem; you've got to be two to look at each other.

CHERNOBYL

Oral Poem for the Men and Birds of the First Alarm

Serge Pey
CHERNOBYL
<i>Oral Poem for the Men and Birds of the First Alarm</i>
That every sky is a bird stain against the void
That every flight is a sky deprived of the undone circle of bird and void
That flight is the sky's ear over bird and void
That void is the mirror of the knot attaching us to the center of the void
That void is a downstroke deprived of the bird flying upon its death
That void is the bowl drinking its rim of emptiness
That void is a provision of death whose birth was lost in true death
That angels of flight are a response inventing the mouth of the question that knows the way
That the form of flight traces bird and man in the void
That the flight of the void gives the appearance of absence to the hapless eye of death
That we drive void's flight down the rifle and old shield of a zero

That the flight of the void separates the sky between man and bird by spreading a comb of stars
That the sky takes the hand of a bird and the wing of a man and hollows out a slab of cartilage in the middle of sleep
That void puts holes in the bird with a magnifying glass of silence that opens a mouth in the heart
That the sky transforms into bird to uncoil the sun like an intestine and blow into its hollow bones
That we roll zeros like wheels to erect a barricade in the void
That zero is another circle of the mouth and O that draws eyes and wells
That the memory appearing before us fills the present against a memory coming at our shoulders
That two memories make up the present that thieves us
That we ride toward the night for we are the center with the unclasped rim of bird and world
That together we are birds robbing death in the image of God
That we erect traps for the sky by bending the holes we create with our eyes
That we left the fire before us upon the photo of a bird that no longer exists in its child's cage of fire

That we are photos of this bird which we sow in the chaos of a single infinite window
That if the bird takes off then we will smash the sex- changing compass that sews vaginas to our soles
That we will immobilize flight in the stone of impossible negation
That we see flight correcting air
That men who fly in the sky tattoo themselves a bird caught in-between the shoul- ders of a single knife strike
That we hear birds walking on earth shod their feet and trails with a single man
That man has a bird sleeping on his mouth united to another bird asleep in fire's wife
That we hide the woman in the bird and the bird in the man like the fire in the fire and the mouth on the kiss
That we watch the invisible flight in the sky recovering the visible woman and man of the two birds
That we count the consonants in the sky through the angles of a divining infinity
That we follow the flight that we don't see and which leaves us a skeleton of feathers in the brain
That there's a flight that lasts two wings on the body of a bird

That there's a flight that plants a single wing in the heart of a bird
That there's a bird that lives an absence of wings on time
That there's a flight that traces its own weight and holds it up in the cloud that misses us
That every sky creates a bird in flight that thinks us once against its will
That we fly to seize in the clouds' beginning the birds that keep us from falling
That all flight supports the sky up in the middle and keeps the skies of extremity at bay where something's making circles to rediscover its face
That man is a fisher of flights who wants to grasp the bird that we no longer see in its scale of feather and air
That bird eats dead man to dress with time a mother unknown in the sky
That man eats live bird to wash an unknown father in fire
That every bird invites a man to die so he may see this flight in the smallest of passages
That flying on our backs we lose ground and see the sky splitting every man into two birds
That man and bird join while crying into infinity like two parallels of sex
That sky invades the numeral bird beneath our fingernails

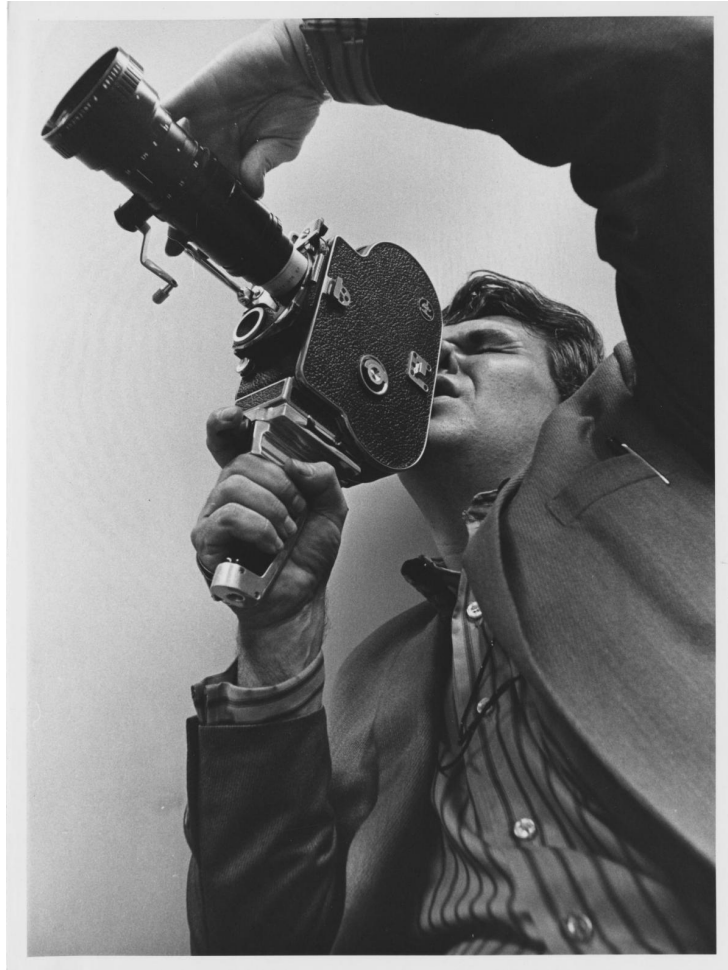
and makes it number in the flesh
That all flying things are undone quotations of unity stretched out between the invisible and the gouged-out eyes of those who've seen the visible
That in the sky every bird begins the sky and beats wings against it in circles and sleeps
That we've left the wind behind the earth while pitching feathers from a bird suspended in lightning around it
That we fly around smoldered fires where we blended our paws and feet to trace writing in the ashes
That dead birds fly among the shadows and hook anuses onto the sky's metaphysics
That flight trembles from our insides out to a beat of symmetry and love
That what lies ahead is a kind of memory falling down from the eyes of a bird in tears
That we fly toward the immobile flight that thinks us in the other flight enclosing the bird
That we see the bird uniting wheels and turning a hub on the other side of the sky like a chariot of a hundred thousand ages
That air is a bristling that draws the tip of air
That we fly toward a locked-up bird by squeezing an open bird

that holds the sky in the sky and the earth in the earth
That there's a bird that falls in itself from bird to bird up to the untranslatable bird that doesn't repeat it
That every bird melting in our heart stays in the air like a chute keeping the sky in reserve
That we march toward the leaf that supported the first tree on earth
That we walk toward the egg that calls the bird that covers the sky with all the world's birds
That we walk toward the counter-bird that sketches the limit of the egg's forms in the forest of light
That to every dead being a bird returns from the absence inside of us by erecting us in its eternity
That to every living being a bird leans a lever against the pane of the center touching it
That a bird moistens our fingers with a bit of night to drink the day boiling in a dead person's sleep
That we fly by stripping the sky with the bird sewing the holes in the passages where we flee
That we go on to where we have never returned

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

STAN BRAKHAGE



LETTER TO ROBERT KELLY¹

¹ What follows is the transcription of one letter from Stan Brakhage to Robert Kelly. The original typescripts are kept in the Brakhage Archives and may be found at this location: Robert Kelly Correspondence (1965–1980), Box 20, Folder 1, The Brakhage Archives, Norlin Library, University of Colorado, Boulder. Thanks to P. Adams Sitney for the photo reproductions, and to Marilyn Brakhage for permission to reprint the letter here. This letter, and one other to Robert Kelly, is featured in *A City Full of Voices*, ed. by Pierre Joris with Peter Cockelbergh & Joel Newberger (Contra Mundum Press, 2020).

1.

January 9, 1965

Ah, yes, dear Robert —

you shall hear much from me on THIS matter, postsumptuously...tho' perhaps not all NOW, herein — this being a day of coming down with cold, strapped throat pulling on my brain, etc.

Of all the dictionaries', I think I like Welsh: gwest: best, the clear sense of "a going out": but, as the mouth in its creation of hollow for air intake and THEN "o" expellation with "st" shut out, runs thru most pronunciations of that word, it implies an in AND out going form — "guest", mostly expellation, being perhaps truest Western sound sense at latest, as (D.H. Lawrence's intro to "Bottom Dogs"): "The savage American was conquered and subdued at the expense of the instinctive and intuitive sympathy of the human soul. The fight was too brutal...the heart was broken" ... and/or ... "Once the heart is broken, people become repulsive to one another secretly, and they develop social benevolence... The American senses other people by their sweat and their kitchens. By which he means, their repulsive effluvia. And this is basically true. Once the blood-sympathy breaks, and only the nerve-sympathy is left, human beings become secretly intensely repulsive to one another, physically, and sympathetic only mentally and spiritually." ... etc. And, viz "Western": "The deep psychic change which we call the breaking of the heart, the collapse of the flow of spontaneous warmth between a man and his fellows, happens of course now all over the world" (by which: "world": Lawrence meant "Western", knowing little, as nor do I, of The East).

Ah Robert, it is just that I would kindle warmth here, keeping this place by the sweat of its kitchen, ALL its rooms LIVING, nourish its instincts, make it an into-it place, it is just THAT that makes me avoid "social benevolence" and/or forms of lonely "arabs", etcetera...I read the sense anyway, via fairy-tales (the sense of Western Grimness) that: "Guest COULD be messengers from God" and/or gods and goddesses themselves as of old test...could THUS be other, and not necessarily messengers of The World either. But there is no doubt in my mind that P. Adams brought much good into the house — sense, for instance in my very rejection of him, OF what I'm doing...and, for another instance, via his gift of THE GEOGRAPHICAL HISTORY OF AMERICA OR THE RELATION OF HUMAN NATURE TO THE HUMAN MIND (G. Stein), the SURE sense of heart break's begin again and/or a gain, viz:

"That is what makes politics and religion and propaganda and communism and individualism the saying yes and this is always the same that is because it is the human mind and all the human mind can do is to say yes. Now do you see why there is no relation between human nature and the human mind.

Human nature can not say yes, how can human nature say yes, human nature does what it does but it cannot say yes. Of course human nature can not say yes. If it did it would not be human nature.

“Saying yes is interesting but being human nature is not interesting it is just like being anything and being anything is not interesting even if you can say anything because the only that is interesting is saying yes. Poor America is it not saying yes, is it loosing the human mind to become human nature. Oh yeah.”

The ROUND DANCES (& Trobar & Matter-of-Fact-Chart) arrived this morning’s mail; and phrases thereof move immediately into my living — for instance, as of this letter: ALL atmospheres engendered by guests are (as your benevolence, my crabbiness) are dancing partners in the light of the TEMPERament):

“The birds are in one tree now, neglect, neglect, how many
hours blind here in darkness,
afraid to turn the light on,
not every augury, not any
augury worth enduring.

It is a large world you swing, Great Man, and one that has such tempers OF NECESSITY in it...but how CLEARLY you put it: “worth enduring” — beyond any of my a(u)rgur(y)ing. And then how you clarify the “my own” (dog, film, etc.) which has upped and set me these last several years, viz:

“you are such eyes & in your letter to my wife you write of
your “own” self,
alyssum . which takes its name, it is not madness
I would be large in commendation of this herb, were I but
eloquent”

and then, and lending PURE distinction to those searches I was, phone-wise, making last night to you viz: eyes searching for name-sake among the stars & stars in the eyes (and ears) of The World, and then your:

“It is your eyes that carry you, you must go with them”

AND:

“The focusses surround the sight, the world dances
between our eyes.”

And all of ROUND DANCE: THE ANIMAL (others I’ve only had time to take in phrases thereof) moves thru me in a dance with Stein’s observations on dogs

sleeping for distinctions between HUMAN NATURE & THE HUMAN MIND, viz, here:

“There is no real reality to a really imagined life any more.

“Nothing I like more than when a dog barks in his sleep.

“That is a reality that can be known not by listening but by the dog who is asleep and feels like barking, he barks as if he barks and it is a bark it really is a bark although he is only dreaming. How much does he know that he is barking.

“Human nature moves around and does the human mind move around.”

I feel, by copying her here, some prime distinction of your rythmn — ah YES, it is the DIMENSION (as distinct from Stein’s flat art)...and now on check that you ARE, yes, playing on my mind’s rythmn centers distinctly in ROUND DANCES (as I found envisioning centers shifted one to another with clarity, as of eye shift, in WEEKS) these being more of (g)ear shift ((g) there to denote more total body moveovement, as of rythmnwise) and these do BE, then, yes, CLEARLY DANCES (“Clear, or in the clear, among joiners and carpenters, is applied to the net distance between two bodies, where no other intervenes, or between their nearest surfaces” — Webster’s)

Okay,,, this is the next day — cold manifesting itself in knee weakness...THAT tension between brains & pain. Ah, my dream comes suddenly to feelingmind now — the phrase “People, people everywhere / and not a drop to drink” (memoirs of a disappointed vampire?)....a muggy grey people-moving atmosphere — deadly silent...silent? — NO: a hiss of escaping steam. What were all these people, what was I, doing? I cannot remember.

Last night we had guests: four people came up from Denver, with projector, asking to see films. I called my friend Angelo DiBenedetto over (thank God: One of the four was continually insulting. I showed films, extended graciousness, graySHUSHness, finally shutUPness, friend Angelo patient trying to explain something of 2000 years of western culture to the dissatisfied man with the projector, etcetcrrrrrrrrrr. Suddenly a strange woman arrives, come searching for Angelo, natch — comes in out (angel sent, I say) of the night. Party breaks up; BUT fray-end with projector searches me out (needles-needles every air and not a stitch in time) — I turn on his flapping mouth sloooooowly (Actually feeling as if in slow motion) and say: “I’m WARNING you, I have NOT the patience of my friend Angelo to put UP with your kind.” He turns white (Jane said even she was frightened to see my face), apologizes constantly for half an hour until I contrive to get him and friends AND projector OUT. Then I let Angelo read your letter; and he reads it aloud to his girl friend, and Jane and I. Somewhere in it he begins to cry; and we all sit around (THAT closeness) feeling deeply moved by the beauty of it,

the giving benevolence of it; by I am also moved by the SURE sense that I must contrive, however crudely at first, some means, and meanness if necessary, whereby ONLY the godsent of ANY man can enter these environs, let alone this center (no that center may BE let alone, AS center of my working process need no imposition of morality or other because its environs are goodly, Godly), know the center of, say, this kitchen: that soup bowl: is NO place I care to manipulate a long spoon, that evil thrives on such fascinations, such lure to such tricks as contriving ways and means to eat with the devil, endless nutz and pee tricks, etcetera. This house will be [a] place for those who come to do the good work, find each his pleasure in himself, a share of godliness with each other. And, ah, yes, we will take in wounded heroes, as I take P. Adams to be ("clean of Europe", yes, but NOT clean of what was given him, NOT chosen by him, to defend there) but in the, from NOW on, sense of: leave your rings at the door, no loaded closed systems allowed, and so forth — "to the end of the world"...which finds its end in each instant of any being right here, wherever any and all are, after all — as IS said and done...ah MEN!

And to help your "crabbiness" a little — bless you for uplift of mine into open clarity — DUENDE is in THIS house, ALL issues thereof, each of which we much look forward to receiving...I have also seen complete collection in Pocatello (you know where!) and three such complete collections in S.F., plus a full supply thereof at City Lights.

Love,
Stan

Ah, God, I could go on for hours. Rythmn centers much differently than visions do in the mind. It seems to me, for instance that any approximation to wave of sound evokes most center sense of hearing but then TOO most inner penetration. A wave-like rythmn, then, OUTside/inSIDE ultimate in hearing. A direct repetition seems more at surface, as drum, of ear: but a steady flow of variations plus some more middle ground of inner hearing. For instance:

"The birds are in one tree now"

pulls, as if, directly upon the brain cells for association, whereas:

" ,neglect, neglect,"

is a drum bridge at the ear(drum)'s surface TO, as if in answer to, the inner as sociate (that is: if it had been preceded by a wave-like rythmn the reach

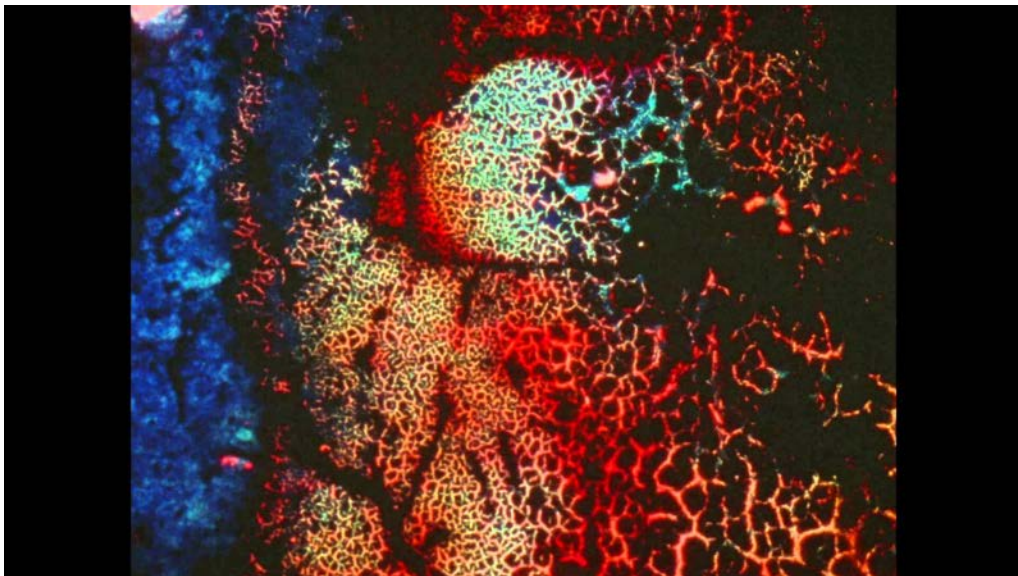
would have been in t'other direction, viz: OUT.) Taking the next, then, as one large hollow between wave crests ("many" and "darkness"):

"how many
hours blind here in darkness,"

falls (because of direction given by repeat beat TO inner and by hollow of wave, as always, made up of flow) to some innermost rythmn center to pluck at the borders of the subconscious.

Well, but there's a lot of strata I'm leaving out: and I'm leaving off of this, for now, only because I'm sure to start forcing some sense into where I've not entirely sensed. Anyway, you know your work is going a lively ROUND and about this house.

Love,
Stan



Stan Brakhage, still from *Song 23: 23rd Psalm Branch* (1965)

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

DEJAN LUKIĆ



Shimshal Valley, NASA Earth Observatory/Jesse Allen (2017)

GALACTIC DROPLET

Theorems on Globular Stirrings

0.

The importance of the whisper: in one of the early earthly stories, the very first law (“do not eat from the tree of knowledge”) was bypassed through a seductive whisper of the serpent. From there the domination of the earth unfurled. For the whisper corrodes conviction as well as comforts dread (as in lullabies). Falling as cosmic dust particles, it fertilizes thought, just as meteorite dust fertilizes the plankton in the seas (effective and imperceptible).

To be of the earth is a curse (one that arrives through a whisper); for one has to resist its limitations (borders of cognition, culture, history, territory). Because only resistance (a movement of contention) provides life with illustriousness, even when it is steeped in the mud (thinking of the partisans during second world war, and their secret and irregular movements, covered in mud). For a moment, every now and then, politics turn geomorphic.

1.

The first stories that humans told themselves were about journeys, embarking on an adventure without proper goals, where earth operates as an infinite cryptogram. The meaning of life lies in the proliferation of passwords; each discovery, a discovery of a riddle. In peregrination reality loosens, forming a meander; the web loosens and reality becomes bearable (thinking of the writer Bruno Schulz). It is not for nothing that a schizophrenic is prescribed a walk.

A layering of atmospheres, the envelopes of earth: a series of surfaces enclosing the celestial body like the lineaments inside of an egg. With scales of time that belong to geological movements and aquatic usurpations. For this reason it is necessary to think earth’s movements as anaphoric variations: figures of speech that repeat themselves in each new sentence. For inside all movement lies the repetition of the new (thinking of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze).

To address the stories of the earth one has to be like earth: containing millions of worlds (one for each species of plant, mineral, crustacean, animal) and thousands of ontologies (one for every society that ever existed). For each one of these aggregates the earth is something different. Yet all of them exist only because they can move, drift, or stir.

2.

Earth is a planet whose surface is entirely cut up with arbitrary lines (so-called borders) by human institutions (so-called nations). Lines that enforce, prevent, or

encourage movement. This territorial cut-up is called politics. Yet earth is a moving object in itself oblivious to political lines.

Galactic politics, which follow astrophysical laws, are a game of release (of rays, clouds, energies) and capture (of gravitational pulls of planets in close range, black holes). Indeed, from the conception of the universe as an ordered mechanism (thinking of the classical scientists), to an idea that it resembles spit and its multiplicity of bubbles (thinking of the philosopher-writer Georges Bataille), to the present image that it is like a spider web or entangled lines with droplets (thinking of the artist Tomás Saraceno) — the prospect of capture and release remains.

Galaxies within galaxies reveal a preoccupation with lines quite different than those of heads of states. Plus, one always travels alongside some filament, as if on a galactic highway (the spider does not know if its lines are deep in the forest or deep in space, it moves along regardless). The universe is thus a conglomeration of filaments, dipped into dark energy, onto which celestial bodies crystalize. Earth — a crystal droplet — is more liquid than earthly (71% of its surface is water); water is also in its air and in its soil.

3.

Earth: a celestial body where survival and adaptation enfold through cruelty and beauty, entwined in one and the same process. Indeed, inhabiting the earth entails consuming things of the earth: plants, animals, fresh water, etc. The entire earth is caught in cycles of consumption of such proportions no one can disentangle.

The entanglement as a cipher: earth as a knot, a jumble of lines alongside which, or under which, or upon which, one traces one's life. The knot: a monster of energy (thinking of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche). Here energy collides, destroys, emerges; in one word, transfigures. Transfiguration is another term for movement elevating itself, even if monstrously; literally, in Latin *transfigurare* means “across figure”; that is to say, crossing figures, forms, outlines; or in a word (made of two), being-teratological.

Earthly life moves. To be alive is to be able to move (no matter how slow). At the heart of galactic life then is a simple strife: movement and the halting of all movement. From the eruptions of celestial objects to the ballooning spiders to the drowning immigrants; it is the crossing of territories, the battling of elements, which inscribes them into existence. Yes, to cross the earth is to battle the laws of both physics and politics. To be graceful, which sometimes happens, is to elope, to leap over or under that which is sacrosanct; to trick the sacred.



Baltic Algae Bloom, NASA (2015)

4.

Earth has only one (hidden) function: to attain the highest degree of freedom. All creatures, all things, animate and inanimate, strive toward this placeless destination. The sense of freedom increases with the opening of the horizon. The more space one can inhabit (even just with the eye or ear), the stronger the feeling of freedom. This might be the underlying reason for all the cruelties entailed in the acts of conquering space on this planet. For the crudest way of ensuring the feeling of one's freedom is subjugating space and everything in it.

Yet the earth itself is not free as it turns and turns around the Sun, its master that provides it with life (thinking of the ancient Egyptian and Mesoamerican solar

religions) and around itself (60,000 miles per hour according to human measurement), balancing along an invisible line of circumvention like an intensely focused acrobat. It is this hazardous spinning suspended between hard physical laws and utter coincidence that is manifested in all life on the planet. For every molecule is galactic and carries within itself this galactic strife. A discord between obeying the law (be it of nature, of the state, or of religion) and escaping the law (the anarchic impulse through which it senses that all laws are enslaving).

Is there an escape? The great magnetic element that constitutes gravitation in all things has no mercy; it operates according to the laws of a strange attraction of polarities. And yet everything that moves according to these laws also dreams of escaping them, of unchaining itself, just as the moon slowly drifts away from the earth, liberating itself little by little (1.6 inches a year), patiently taking billions of human years to do it. Hence the architects' chronic dream: always, gravitationless edifices.

5.

Everything forms through the elusive combination of chaotic chance and geometric intentionality. Just like the lineaments, the only real lines of the earth, parts of the so-called fracture or shear zones, form in the strife of geological emergence. And similar mega and microlines crisscross all surfaces: from a lizard's skin to the imperceptible coiling lines of the wind; from the underground movements of fungi to the thoughts of prisoners dreaming of taking a walk outside.

The only non-utilitarian purpose of the earth is to drift through these lineaments. For earth is full of separations which preclude movement and estrange all things from the immanent immensity of the universe (thinking of the philosopher Gaston Bachelard). Only at the limits (at lines that furnish thresholds) does one exceed limitations.

It is therefore in the nature of the earth to move, and this movement invites everything that lives to move: rocks move seismically, animals move according to the smells and sounds that attract them, plants move in all directions depending on the light and humidity. The speed of movement ranges from the imperceptible (the tectonic movements of continents) to the vertiginous speeds of digital algorithms (high-frequency trading) to the speeds for which there are yet no measurements (like the speed of radical thought which leaves a trail of cloudiness). On this spectrum of possibilities, even death, or presumed stagnation, is merely a movement in fermentation.

Speed alone is instrumental (it turns movement into an instrument), not creative; gracefulness, on the other hand, and everything that embodies it (stealth, stillness, counter-movement, fractalization, floating) produces new ways of living.

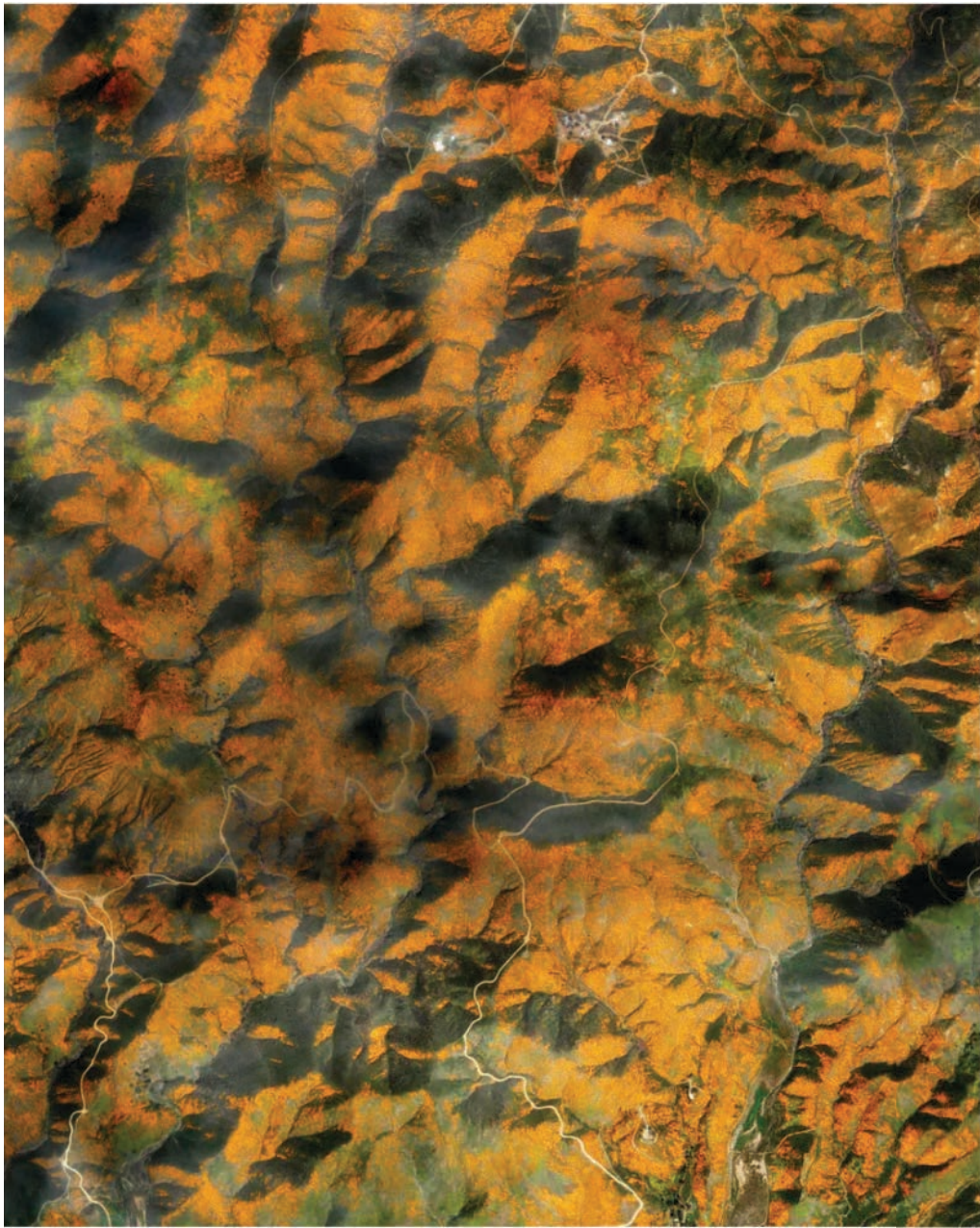
6.

The cosmic dance of the earth, like that of a floating jellyfish in an open sea, is of utter danger.

(Jellyfish are most closely attuned to the intrinsic qualities of the universe: they are partially spherical, material and immaterial, and one specie is potentially eternal; they are omnipresent on the earth, roaming all the seas and all its surfaces and depths; they have tentacles that are like roots or rhizomes, sometimes called oral arms which contain minimouth orifices; they move by pulsation, the most cosmic movement of all.)

This cosmic dance repeats itself on every scale: earth's movement is part of the galactic choreography which will eventually (4 billions years from now) collide with the another galaxy out of which will come yet another swirl. Question then: does every movement begin/end in collision, which is to say violence?

The enormous perception of different scales: from the infinitesimal (molecular) to the infinite (galactic). Microscopic, telescopic, stereoscopic, astroscopic: the earth expands and contracts through the extensions and reductions of the eye. Now roaming the earth with a distant oculus (thinking of the satellite lens) one sees the contours of elegance, the meandering lines of rivers and creeks, the undulations of waves and mountains, the expanse of the oceans, the archipelagos dotting the expanse, the lights of cities in the night. However, the closer the look, the clearer the wars, the devourings of one another, the viruses and death. The change of scale provides a radical realization: always, fright in splendor.



California Wildflower Superbloom, Lake Elsinore, CA

7.

But one cannot speak of the earth as if it is a person. The laws that govern these movements are indifferent to the aftereffects of “what consumes what” in this trajectory of creation. The secret: a nub of indifference is the internal violence that animates the whole. A nub of internal violence is, difficult to say — the unnamable sound, the rumbling of grace.

Still, there is an inherent synchronicity between the cosmic and the materially specific; a form of dangerous immanence. The planetary nucleus, the quasi-essence of nature, is everywhere and in everything at the same time. For nature is only a term for the sensation of belonging to the same process of life, unrelenting and paradoxical, that claims all as being unquestionably one with it.

What is called nature is a conglomeration of millions of natures, each perfect in itself and yet in a strange rhythmic counterpoint where worlds interpenetrate and affect each other (thinking of the biologist Jakob von Uexküll). There is no unitary purpose in it, only a multitude of small purposes: the following of a habit or of a temperamental preference.

8.

Life as peril. One is sharply aware of it in migration. One is aware of it when attempting to inscribe a new reality (political, economic, metaphysical). One is aware of it when crossing the sea in overcrowded boats. Abyss below, infinite horizon ahead: freedom and nothingness. Thousands drown, just like the many sea-creatures that are devoured on their way to a new life after hatching on the beach. Is this risky motility not mirroring the movement of the entire universe which expands (blindly or intelligently) incessantly, while burning, exploding, vaporizing, and swallowing concurrently?

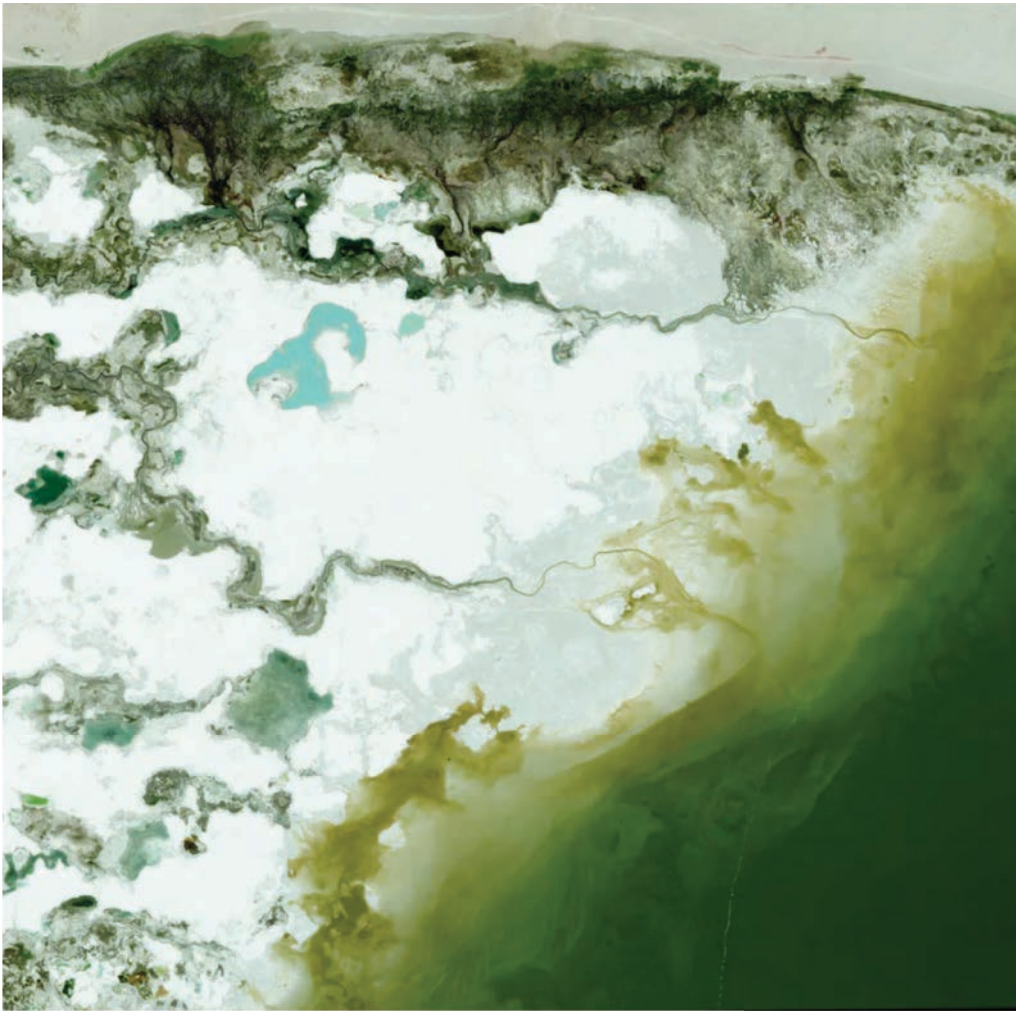
Earth as a crossing. A site for sojourning where every place is temporary. Not for the recreational purposes of the masses and their scenic gaze, but for reasons of a kinetic metaphysics embedded in every droplet of the body. Pilgrimages were not revelatory because of the sacred site they adored; they were intensely spiritual because of the exhaustive walk through the landscapes; discerning the world on foot.

(There is a ninety-year old man spending his days running through the forests of Pacific Northwest; his only purpose is to forge new hiking paths, to traverse the lineaments as they are being constructed; he learns the syntax of the forest in order to rearrange it, as part of the game, by making perambulatory passwords.)

Earth as traversing globule. Walking, swimming, surfing, crawling, floating, climbing, running: great kinetic exercises. Through vivacious modalities life is born. Immense strobilations, twistings and turnings, visible and invisible segmentations of the improbable.

9.

Earth as atmospheric wisdom requires atmospheric thinking. For what grows, endures, arrives, dissipates in the movement of the waves and winds? (Is this movement beyond good and evil or does it have secret ethics?) At this point it can be said that everything consists of lineaments which emanate specific atmospheres. An individual too is a layering of masks deep under which there is a fog-nucleus, a fabulistic lair, where future events precipitate.



Caaji Co, Ngari Prefecture, China

Before meaning there is only a sensation, a rhythmic sway of the inceptional movement. In the same way, at the end of every lineage, every genealogy, there is a mesh. Atmospheric thought crosses the lineaments of space and time in order to reach this nebulous, elemental palpability.

Nebula: an interstellar gas or dust cloud. It is said that being nebular means being unclear or lost in thought. But on the contrary, planetary thought requires intentional nebularity, even in writing. For example, the parentheses here operate as clarifying whispers (trickles of reality), resembling unsettled cosmic dust particles.

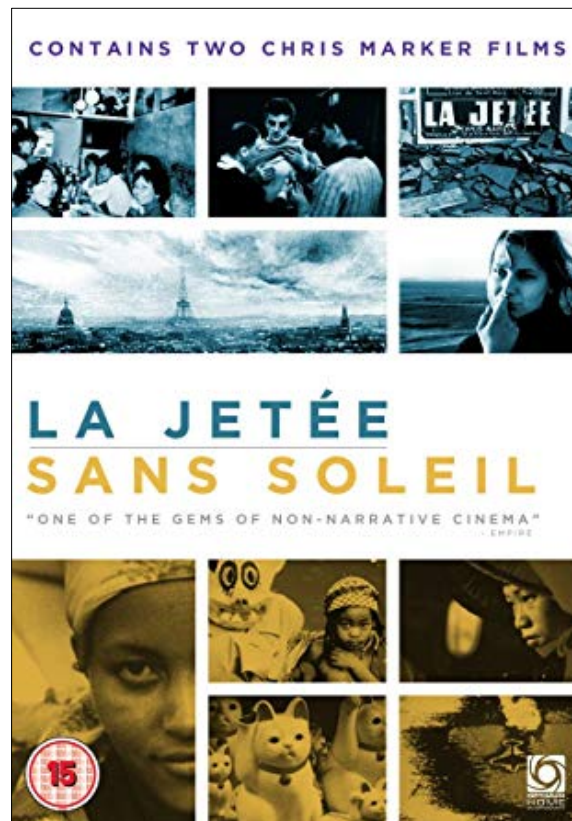
Nebulae: regions where new stars are born; zones of nascency where the process of moving is already underway, albeit still undifferentiated in its prepossessing formlessness. This is where the thought of new earths is born: in galactic regionalism thought floats freely, without judgment, without identity, with the potential to be, and to address, everything. Out of this opaque mist emerge melodic scores, or photonic fairy tales, as biochemical metaphysics. As resounding intimations of the distant.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

RARE MARKER¹

BY SAMUEL DOUHAIRE & ANNICK RIVOIRE



Tr. by Rainer J. Hanshe

On the occasion of the DVD release of Chris Marker's films *Sans Soleil* and *La Jetée*, below is a rare interview with one of the most secretive filmmakers.

The release of *Sans soleil* and *La jetée* on DVD is an event, as any furtive appearance in news about Chris Marker, one of the great filmmakers of our time, the most secret, too. Chris Marker, 81, has always preferred to let his images speak

¹ Originally published in [Liberation](#) (March 5, 2003).

rather than his image: less than a dozen photos of him exist; interviews with him are even more rare.

The filmmaker agreed to a lengthy interview with *Libération*, by e-mail and pre-composed: four themes, with ten questions per theme. He did not respond to every question, but his responses, at times "downright Dostoevskian," more than fulfill us.

Q: Cinema, photo-roman, CD-ROM, video installations, DVD. Is there any medium that you have not tried?

Chris Marker: The gouache.

Q: Why did you agree to a DVD edition of certain films, and how did you decide to do so?

CM: Twenty years separate *La jetée* from *Sans soleil*. And another twenty years separate *Sans soleil* from the present. In such conditions, to speak on behalf of the one who made those films, it is not an interview, it's spiritism. In fact, I believe that I did not accept or choose; someone talked about it, and it happened. That there was a certain relation between the two films, I knew it, but I did not see the need to explain myself... Until I found in a program published in Tokyo a little anonymous note that said: "Soon the journey is coming to an end... It's only then that we will know that the juxtaposition of images makes sense. We will realize that we prayed with him, as should be so in a pilgrimage, every time we attended death, at the cat cemetery, before a dead giraffe, before the kamikazes at the moment of takeoff, before the dead guerrillas in the war of Independence... In *La Jetée*, the reckless experience of seeking survival in the future ends with death. In dealing with the same subject twenty years later, Marker overcame death through prayer." When you read that, written by someone who does not know you, who knows nothing about the genesis of the films, you feel some emotion. "Something" has been transmitted.

Q: When Immemory, your CD-ROM, was released in 1999, you said you found in multimedia the ideal technology. What do you think of DVD technology?

CM: In the CD-ROM, it's not so much the technology that counts, it's the architecture, the tree structure, the play. We will make DVD-ROMS. DVD technology is obviously superb, but it's still not cinema. Godard nailed it once and for all: at the cinema, we raise our eyes to the screen, before the TV, the video, we lower them. There's also the role of the shutter. Of the two hours spent in a movie theater, we spend one hour in the dark. It's that nocturnal part that remains with us, that "fixes" our memory of a film in a different way from the same film seen on TV or on a

monitor. That said, let's be honest. I just watched the ballet from *An American in Paris* on the screen of my iBook, and I almost discovered the joy we felt in London in 1950, with Resnais and Cloquet, during the shooting of *Statues Also Die*, when every morning, at the 10AM screening at the Leicester Square movie theater, we started the day by watching the movie again. A joy that I thought I had definitely lost through watching it on tape.

"Tools and Necessity are Essential"

Q: Does the democratization of cinema production tools (DV, digital editing, distribution channels via the Internet...) appeal to the committed filmmaker that you are?

CM: This is a good opportunity to strip away a label that encumbers me. For many people, "engaged" means "political," and politics, the art of compromise (which is as it should be — out of compromise only the relation of brute force exists, of which we see an example right now...), bores me deeply. What impassions me is History, whereas politics interests me only to the extent that politics is the marks that History makes upon the present. With a recurring curiosity (if I identify with a Kipling character, it's the Elephant Boy of the *Just-So Stories*, because of his "insatiable curiosity") I ask, how do people live in such a world? which is where my mania arises to go see "what's happening" here or there. For a long time those who were in the best position to express what happens didn't have the tools to shape what they witnessed, and such raw perception loses its force. And now the tools exist. It's true that for people like me it's a loop. In the DVD booklet, I wrote a brief clarifying text that you may be able to include somewhere.

A necessary caveat: although the "democratization of tools" frees one from many technical and financial constraints, it does not free one from the constraint of work. Possession of a DV camera doesn't magically confer talent upon someone who doesn't have it, or who is too lazy to figure out if he has any. We can miniaturize as much as we want — a film will always require a lot of work. And a reason to do it. That's the story of the Medvedkin groups, those young workers who in post-68 were making brief works about their own lives, and we were trying to help them on a technical level, with the means of the time. How they were moaning! "We come back from work, and you ask us to continue working..." But they persisted, and we must believe that, again, something happened, since 30 years later we saw them present their films at the Belfort Festival, before an attentive audience. The means of the time was the non-synchronous 16mm, so three minutes of autonomy, a laboratory, an editing table, figuring out how to add sound, everything that is available now, compacted inside a hand-held gadget.

A little lesson in modesty for spoiled children, just like those of 1970 had received their lesson of modesty (and history) under the patronage of Alexander Ivanovich Medvedkin and his cine-train. For the younger generation, Medvedkin is the Russian filmmaker who, in 1936, and with the means of his time (35mm film, editing table, and film lab installed in the train itself), invented television: shoot during the day, print and edit at night, and project the next day to the very people whom he had filmed, and who had often taken part in the shooting.

I believe that it is this fabled and long-ignored story (in “Sadoul,” considered in its time to be the Bible of Soviet cinema, Medvedkin was not even mentioned) that underlies a large part of my work, maybe the only consistent part after all. Try to give voice to people who do not have it, and when possible help them find their means of expression. It was the 1967 workers at Rhodia, but also the Kosovars that I filmed in 2000, who had never been heard on television: everyone spoke on their behalf, but once they were no longer on the roads, bloody and weeping, they didn’t interest anyone. It was the young apprentice filmmakers of Guinea-Bissau to whom, to my great surprise, I was explaining the editing of *Battleship Potemkin* with an old print with rusty reels who now have their feature films selected in Venice (look out for the next musical of Flora Gomes...).

I still found the Medvedkin syndrome in a Bosnian refugee camp in 1993, kids who had learned all the tricks of TV, with presenters and generic effects, by hacking onto the satellite and thanks to a little gear offered by an NGO, but they did not copy the dominant language, they used the codes to be credible and reappropriated information for the use of other refugees. An exemplary experience. They had the tools, and they had the need. Both are indispensable.

“I Start Watching Movies by Looking Down”

Q: What do you like more, TV, movies on the big screen, or browsing on the Internet?

CM: I have a completely schizoid relationship with TV. When I feel alone in the world, I love it, especially since the existence of cable. It’s even curious to see with what precision cable offers a catalog of antidotes to the poisons of TV. If one channel is playing a ridiculous TV movie about Napoleon, you can flip to the History channel to hear the incredibly intelligent malice of Henri Guillemin. If a literary program forces us to watch a parade of fashionable monstrosities, we run to Mezzo to contemplate the beautiful luminous face of Hélène Grimaud in the midst of her wolves, and it is as if the others had never existed...

Now there are times when I remember that I am not alone in the world, and at such times I collapse. Everyone recognizes the exponential progression of stupidity and vulgarity, but it isn’t only a vague feeling of disgust, it’s a concrete, quantifiable

fact (we could measure it by the volume of “wool!”s that greet talk-show hosts, which has risen an alarming number of decibels in the last five years), and which is a crime against humanity. Not to mention the continued assault against the French language.

And since you are exploiting my Russian penchant for confession, I must say the worst: I am advertiphobic. At the beginning of the sixties, that was perfectly fine; since then, it’s become literally unspeakable. I’m helpless. That way of putting the mechanism of slander at the service of praise has always irritated me, even if I recognize that such diabolical sponsorship sometimes leads to the most beautiful images that one can see on a small screen (have you seen the David Lynch commercial with blue lips?). A small consolation in the vernacular: it happens that the cynics betray themselves. Without flinching all the same before the term creator, they had invented that of “creative,” and there I find that the unconscious did not malfunction. One can well imagine that they would be, for example, “*gladiatives*.”²

And films in all this? For the reasons explained above, under the guidance of Jean-Luc, I have long professed that films should be seen first in theaters; TV and VCR are only there to refresh the memory. Now that I no longer have the time to go to the cinema, I myself start to watch films by looking downward, with a growing sense of sin (this interview becomes a bit Dostoevskian...). But I really don’t watch a lot of movies, except those of my friends, or curiosities that an American friend tapes for me from TCM. There is too much to see on the news, in reports, on the already mentioned music channels, or on the indispensable animals channel. And my need for fiction feeds on what is by far the most accomplished source: the great American TV series, in the style of *The Practice*. There is a knowledge, a sense of narrative, abridgement, ellipse, a science of framing and editing, a dramaturgy and acting work that have no equivalent anywhere, and especially not in Hollywood.

Q: *La jetée* inspired a video by David Bowie, a film by Terry Gilliam, and in Japan there is a bar called *La jetée*. What does this cult inspire in you? Does the imagination of Terry Gilliam join yours?

CM: Terry’s imagination is rich enough that we don’t need to play comparisons. What is certain is that for me *12 Monkeys* is a magnificent film (There are people who try to flatter me by saying no, *La jetée* is much better. The world is weird.) and that it’s just one of those happy avatars, like Bowie’s music video, like Shinjuku’s bar (Hi Tomoyo! to say that for 40 years, groups of Japanese are blissfully drunk beneath my images every night, it’s worth every Oscar!) who have accompanied the rather special destiny of this film. It was made so to speak like automatic writing. I was

² Marker’s neologism. A fusion of *gladiateurs* (gladiators) and *créatifs* (creatives).

shooting *Le Joli Mai*, I was completely immersed in the reality of Paris 1962, and the slightly exhilarating discovery of direct cinema (you will never make me say “cinéma vérité”...) and on the crew’s day off, I photographed a story that I did not understand much, it’s in the editing that the pieces of the puzzle came together on their own, but it wasn’t me who had designed the puzzle, I would find it difficult to claim any ownership. It happened, that’s all.

“The ‘Noise’ Ends Up Covering Everything”

Q: You are a witness of History. Are you still interested in world affairs? What makes you jump to your feet, react, cry?

CM: At the moment there are obvious enough reasons to protest, and they are so widely shared that we don’t want to add to them. There remain little personal rages. 2002 was for me the year of a failure that will never end. It starts with a flashback, as in *The Barefoot Contessa*. Of all our friends of the ’40s, François Vernet was the one we all considered a future very great writer. He had already published three books, and the fourth was going to be a collection of short stories he was writing during the Occupation, with a vigor and insolence that obviously left him with no chance in the face of the censors. The book wasn’t published until 1945. Meanwhile, François had died in Dachau. Well, there’s no question of depicting him as a martyr; it’s not my style. Even if this death puts a kind of symbolic seal on an already singular destiny and its “stolen flight,” as Vissotsky would have said, the texts themselves are of such a rare quality that one doesn’t need any reasons other than literary ones to love them and make them be loved. François Maspero wasn’t mistaken when he said in a superb article that they “cross time with no ballast other than an extreme lightness of being.” Because last year a courageous publisher, Michel Reynaud (Tiresias), was enthusiastic about the book and took the risk of republishing it. I ran to mobilize everyone I knew, not to make it the event of the season, not to dream, but simply to get people to talk about it. But no, there were too many books that season. Save for Maspero, nothing, not a word in the press. And so failure.

A too personal reaction? By chance it was coupled with another similar event, to which there is no bond of friendship. The same year saw the release by Capriccio records of a new record by Viktor Ullmann. Under his name alone, this time. Previously, he and Gideon Klein had been published among “the composers of Theresienstadt” (for the younger generations: Theresienstadt was this model camp designed to be visited by the Red Cross; the Nazis made a film about it, *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*). With the best intentions in the world, it was a way of putting them back in the camp. If Messiaen had died after composing the *Quartet for the End of Time*, would he be the “composer of the prison camps”?

That record is devastating: it contains lieder based on texts by Hölderlin and Rilke and one is seized by the truly dizzying idea that, at that moment, no one glorified true German culture more than a Jewish musician who would soon die at Auschwitz. That time, there wasn't total silence, just a few complimentary lines in the cultural sections. Was it not worth more? So what makes me mad is not that the media coverage, as we say, is generally reserved for people that I personally find rather mediocre, that's a matter of opinion and I do not wish them any harm. It's that the rise of "noise," in the electronic sense, ends up obliterating everything, and leads to a monopoly, just as supermarkets are able to dominate corner stores. That the unsung writer and the brilliant musician are entitled to the same solicitude as the local grocer is perhaps too much to ask. And since you gave me the floor, I will add one more name to my list of injustices of the year: we have not spoken enough about the most beautiful book I have read in a long time, short stories again: *The Bride of Odessa*, by Edgardo Cozarinsky.

Q: Have repetitive trips made you suspicious of dogmatism?

CM: I think I was suspicious at birth. I must have traveled a lot before.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

FRITZ SENN

EVENTS IN LANGUAGE: JOYCEAN EXTRAS



Louis Le Brocquy, *James Joyce* (1977). Oil on canvas, 703 x 704 mm

The following extended remarks have one highly unoriginal purpose — to show, at the risk of being redundant, how consummately Joyce handled language. They concentrate not on the content, the What, but on How something is expressed. Such an approach entails slow and careful reading, a series of close-ups, with the perennial danger of essentially subjective comments.

Among the variegated quotations in *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* a particular one is taken from “a ragged book written by a Portuguese priest”:

Contrahit orator, variant in carmine vates.¹

It has been translated variously: “The orator condenses, the poet-seers amplify in their verses”;² “The orator summarizes, the poet-prophets transform (elaborate) their verses.”³ The gist of both generalizations is that orators and poets proceed in contrasting ways, either by condensation or else amplification, or summaries are contrasted with transformation. Poets, of course, are known for variation.

It may be revealing that Joyce chose a potentially ambiguous rule, for the line refers to a technicality of Latin versification. The meaning of the Latin line is clarified: “A vowel, naturally short, when it goes before a mute and liquid, is common in verse; but in prose it is always short,” according to the author.⁴ Latin verse depends on long and short syllables, not on stress. The combination of “mute” consonants (b, p; f, v; d, t; g) can be either short or long.

Why should Joyce, with a whole long tradition at his command, choose trivia of classical prosody? There is no answer, except that the quote may indicate how small items of sound or rhythm do matter esthetically. This at least is a basis of the observations to follow.

Another starting point is taken from Stephen Dedalus’s pronouncements on Beauty in *A Portrait*, where he holds forth:

[Y]ou apprehend [the esthetic image] as balanced part against part within its limits ...You apprehend it as complex, divisible, separable, made up of its parts, the result of its parts and their sum, harmonious. That is consonantia. (*P* 212)

Harmony/consonantia — how the various parts sound together — has to do with tonal interrelations. An analogous example is recorded by Frank Budgen remembering that Joyce one day had claimed to have written two sentences (no

¹ *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Chester G. Anderson (New York: Viking Press, 1964) 179, henceforward cited parenthetically (*P*).

² *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Anderson (New York: Viking Press, 1968) 523.

³ *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 2016) 264.

⁴ *A Latin Prosody* by Emanuel Alvarez (S.T.P. Dublin, n.d.) 11.

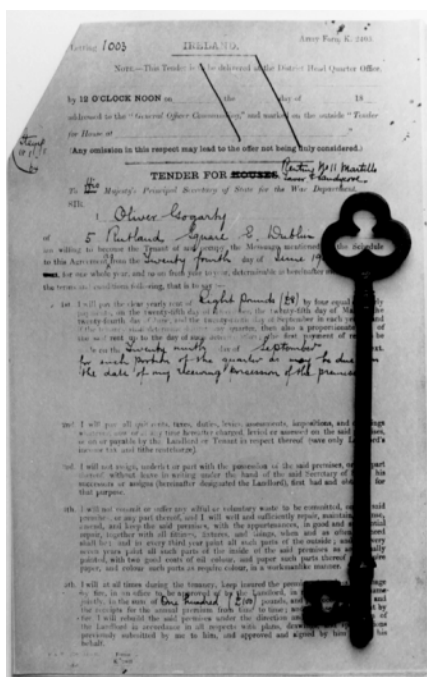
doubt far less than his average output), having the words already but aiming at their perfect order.⁵ The two sentences, from *Lestrygonians*, at that time, around 1918, were:

Perfumes of embraces assailed him. His hungered flesh obscurely, mutely craved to adore.⁶

Bloom is seen from outside, the choice words employed are not within his range, the *register is literary*. But even these sentences were still to be improved on in further refinement.

{Perfumes of embraces assailed him.}
 Perfume of embraces all him assailed.

{His hungered flesh obscurely, mutely craved to adore.}
 With hungered flesh obscurely, he mutely craved to adore.⁷



The choice constructions, idiosyncratic and memorable, are set off from their surroundings, punctiliously (and obscurely) crafted in balanced cadences. They draw attention to themselves as exquisite constructs, a departure from the surrounding colloquial stride.

Life on the Raw

One of the tensions in the first episode turns around the possession of the one (and only) key to the Martello Tower, which in the end will be ceded to Buck Mulligan. It makes an unobtrusive entrance when Haines opens the door:

⁵ Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) 20.

⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses*. A Facsimile of the Manuscript (London: Faber & Faber, in ass. with Philadelphia: The Philip H. & A.S.W. Rosenbach Foundation, 1975) 160–1.

⁷ *Ulysses* 8.637. All references (henceforward parenthetically cited as *U*) are to the critical and synoptic edition, ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfram Steppeler and Claus Melchior (New York: Garland, 1984).

The key scraped round harshly twice and, when the heavy door had been set ajar, welcome light and bright air entered. (*U* 1.327)

One is generally not aware of routine actions like opening a door unless a special effort becomes necessary. The key scrapes “harshly,” with an audible noise, so that another try is called for, “twice”; the mechanism is not functioning too well. The impression is reinforced by a ponderous subordinate clause, separated by commas: “and, when the heavy door had been set ajar,” which again points to additional exertion. Both key and lock must be old, perhaps rusty, not surprising for a historical tower. The extra effort makes the entering air all the more welcome (secondarily, the “heavy” door is set off by “light”). A trivial event is mirrored in language. We now know that the actual key to the Tower was huge and uncomfortable to carry, as is shown in the illustration where it is set against the original lease, but this might already have been deduced from the laborious description. Language, it seems, is acting out what it expresses, a feature that is common in the early, more realistic part of *Ulysses*, where we may come close to an illusion that what happens and how it is put into words coalesce.

In similar presentation, in “Hades,” Bloom is also struggling with the door of the shabby funeral carriage: he “pulled the door to after him and slammed it twice till it shut tight.”⁸ To get out, “Martin Cunningham put out his arm and, wrenching back the handle, shoved the door open with his knee” (*U* 4.9, 4.490; again, note the commas). Incidentally, most objects in the Blooms’ house appear to be old, the “creaky wardrobe,” “secondhand raincoat,” “chipped eggcup,” etc.

An analogous effect is achieved when the carriage arrives at the cemetery: “The felly harshed against the curbstone, stopped” (*U* 6.49), where “harsh” has been turned into an active verb with an almost tactile impact, a verbal imitation which could hardly have been condensed into fewer words.

Joyce’s prose is full of the imitation, or at least simulation, of sensual effects. Lenihan “tossed the tissues on to the table” (*U* 7.390), where alliteration is reinforced by a sibilant sequence in an almost audible compact sentence, this in *Aeolus*, the chapter of rhetorical devices. It also features a combination of assonance and the repetition of initial consonants: “A smile of light brightened his darkrimmed eyes, lengthened his long lips” (*U* 7.560).

The more realistic early episodes feature concise epiphanic sketches that may even evoke noisome repugnance: “A bowl of white china had stood beside her

⁸ In the 1922 edition of *Ulysses* and all subsequent printings before the Gabler *Critical and Synoptic* one, the passage read “... slammed it **tight** till it shut **tight**” (*Ulysses* 1922, 84). This reading, now thrown out as an “erroneous anticipation” (Gabler, III, 1735), would have told a different story in slow motion. Bloom would have thought the door was shut the first time, but then found that another effort was called for, the first “tight” representing a failure, the second the achievement.

deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting" (*U* 1.108). The sentence invites slow, emphatic reading aloud. Stephen Dedalus imagines the corpse of a drowned man rising to the surface in drastic close-up: "Hauled stark over the gunwale he breathes upward the stench of his green grave, his leprous nosehole snoring to the sun" (*U* 3.480). "A man with an infant's sauced napkin tucked round him shovelled gurgling soup down his gullet" (*U* 8.658). Such passages, when read aloud, seem to allow each word to get full attention.

Grace of Alacrity (*U* 11.24)

As against stark almost palpable realistic vignettes, many well-wrought constructions of distinct artifice seem to preen themselves so that they could be isolated as prose poems. They abound in a musically orchestrated episode like "Sirens." The initial arrangement of motif fragments without context, the "Overture," prepares for what is to follow.

"Last rose of Castile of summer left bloom I feel so sad alone" (*U* 11.54).

It combines The Rose of Castile, an opera as yet still unidentified in the book, with Thomas Moore's "Last Rose of Summer" ("Tis the last rose of summer / Left blooming alone"), with a letter Bloom is going to write, but it is also an independent composition with its own intrinsic grace. Early on a poised orchestration of sadness is exemplary:

With sadness.

Miss Kennedy sauntered sadly from bright light, twining a loose hair behind an ear. Sauntering sadly, gold no more, she twisted twined a hair. Sadly she twined in sauntering gold hair behind a curving ear.

— It's them has the fine times, sadly then she said. (*U* 11.81)

The three sentences rearrange a few motifs: "saunter," "sad," "twining/twisting," near-rhyming "hair" and "ear," with assonances: "bright, light, behind, twine," and alliterations: "sadly sauntering," "twisted twined," for which of course musical analogies can be adduced. The para-tautological sketch could be an attempt to tease out the best possible syntactic order, or else it mocks operatic repetitions and variations, internal echoes of identity and difference. Such clusters within an ongoing rhythmical whirl interrupt the current, the continuous flow; they invite leisurely appreciation, they act as timeouts or interludes.

The breathless drawn-out end of an aria in Martha reaches climactic heights:

—Come ...!

It soared, a bird, it held its flight, a swift pure cry, soar silver orb it leaped serene, speeding, sustained, to come, don't spin it out too long long breath he breath long life, soaring high, high resplendent, aflame, crowned, high in the effulgence symbolic, high, of the ethereal bosom, high, of the high vast irradiation everywhere all soaring all around about the all, the endlessnessnessness

— To me! (*U* 11.744)

The extended musical note is descriptive and evocative, in typical amalgamation it features interior monologue fragments as well as echoes from the inflated speech in “Aeolus”⁹ that are outside of Bloom’s potential memory.

Some passages are intricately patterned, as exemplified in an early encounter:

The boots to them, them in the bar, them barmaids came. (*U* 11.89)

The crescendo (“to them, them in the bar, them barmaids”) has a musical effect, but “them barmaids” might also serve the (assumed) colloquialism of the entering person whom the barmaids consider beneath their station. The first occurrence of “boots” in the chapter could be misread as boots in a predominant pars-pr-toto-manner (“Her wet lips tittered”), but it turns out that the word primarily refers to the bootsboy, the lowest rank in the hotel, and generally snubbed. As an unwanted intruder, he is vainly clamoring for attention by threefold repetition: “The boots to them, them in the bar, them barmaids came.” For all the triplicate them, they are still “unheeding him,” so that a clattering noise, with assonant and alliterative reinforcement, emphatically obtrudes: “For them unheeding him he banged on the counter his tray of chattering china.” The carefully structured paragraph includes undercurrent tension as well as a consciousness of class and caste, which will be developed in the next lines.

Internal rhythmic reiteration of themes can approach farcical near-vacuity:

Bald Pat who is bothered mitred the napkins. Pat is a waiter hard of his hearing. Pat is a waiter who waits while you wait. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait. Hee hee. A waiter is he. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait. While you wait if you wait he will wait while you wait. Hee hee hee hee. Hoh. Wait while you wait. (*U* 11.915)

⁹ Dan Dawson’s speech featured “pensive bosom,” “high on high,” “irradiate her silver effulgence” (*U* 7.246–328) and in itself already consisted of an airy aria.

Bloom's endeavor to divert his mind ("Wish they'd sing more. Keep my mind off," *U* 11.914) results in an echoing jingle which revolves around three subjects: wait, hee, while. By apposite chance, the English word "waiter" contains the verb that refers to the time that seems to pass before his attention is caught. As it happens, a lot of waiting is going on in the episode, by Molly in view of Boylan's delay; "Waiting" happens to be a song: "Singing. Waiting she sang" (*U* 11.730). The jingling reformulations also suggest that time is idly whiled away by almost everybody.

Sound variants can turn into blatant nonsense, as in the musings of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait*, where verbal play can go astray:

His own consciousness of language was ebbing from his brain and trickling into the very words themselves which set to band and disband themselves in wayward rhythms and almost empty jingles:

The ivy whines upon the wall,
And whines and twines upon the wall,
The yellow ivy upon the wall,
Ivy, ivy up the wall.

Did anyone ever hear such drivel? Lord Almighty! Who ever heard of ivy whining on a wall? Yellow ivy; that was all right. Yellow ivory also. And what about ivory ivy? (*P* 179)

In some instances, in "Sirens" a pattern as pattern takes precedence over the actual meanings. In an emotional tangle induced by sentimental music, Leopold Bloom erotically imagines "Tipping her tepping her tapping her topping her. Tup" (*U* 11.706), where it does not seem to matter primarily what — exactly — "tepping" stands for, and what the semantic uses of "tipping" or "topping her" are, the sexual current being of course obvious. Such passages preen themselves as self-contained compositions.

Bloom's calculated entrance behind Richard Goulding into the Ormond dining room is depicted with utmost economy:

The bag of Goulding, Collis, Ward led Bloom by ryebloom flowered tables. Aimless he chose with agitated aim, bald Pat attending, a table near the door. Be near. At four. (*U* 11.391)

The "ryebloom flowered tables" are a carry-over from "When the Bloom is on the rye," as unoriginally quoted by Lenihan: "Leopoldo or the Bloom is on the Rye" (*U* 10.524), and was already resumed in "Bloom. Old Bloom. Blue Bloom is on the rye" (*U* 11.230). A delicate situation must be strategically handled by Bloom who unobtrusively wants to choose a seat that allows him, unseen, to observe Boylan's

movements; he has to maneuver carefully, following Goulding, moreover, in the presence of a waiter hovering nearby. He once more assumes a careless air: "Aimless he chose ...," but the latent uneasiness shows in the sequel right away: "... with agitated aim." The subterfuge is condensed into a few words with an inherent contradiction of "aimless" with "chose." "Aimless," moreover, faintly chimes with "tables."

Boylan greeting Lenahan with "I hear you were round," as he enters the Ormond bar, would not deserve any attention if it had not been preceded by a phonetically circular sentence:

Lenahan round the sandwichbell wound his round body round.
(U 11.240)

The phrase "wound round" also turns into an independent motif: "Bloom unwound the elastic band of his packet. ... Bloom slowly wound a skein round four forkfingers, stretched it, relaxed, and wound it round his troubled double, fourfold, in octave, gyved them fast" (U 11.681). "'Tis the last rose of summer dollard left bloom felt wind wound round inside" (U 11.1178). So Lenahan is associated with "round." But apart from the reiteration effect, his physique is in focus too. In *Dubliners* he was described as "squat and ruddy ... But his figure fell into rotundity."¹⁰ So it is not rhyme alone, but also reason, which accounts for the reiteration.

"Sirens" shows itself as — also and predominantly — a patterned artifact. Self-contained sketches tend to halt the narrative current and invite musing over, as in poetry. It is a Joycean epiphanic quality that when a passage is read mutely, or else voiced aloud, every word or phrase tends to achieve its full splendor (whatness) and comes into its own, something to be tasted and dwelt on. "Sirens" is made up of predominantly short paragraphs, preceded and followed by a minimal pause. In its "Overture" each item is isolated to be treated as an autonomous unit. Echoes are also a momentary reluctance to move forward.

A different use of reverberating words is to be found in *A Portrait*, as when Stephen is caught in a vicious whirl of pain:

A hot burning stinging tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick made his trembling hand crumple together like a leaf in the fire: and at the sound and the pain scalding tears were driven into his eyes. His whole body was shaking with fright, his arm was shaking and his crumpled burning livid hand shook like a loose leaf in the air. A cry sprang to his lips, a prayer to be let off. But though the tears

¹⁰"Two Gallants," *Dubliners*, ed. Robert Scholes (New York, Viking Press, 1967) 49.

scalded his eyes and his limbs quivered with pain and fright he held back the hot tears and the cry that scalded his throat. (P 50)¹¹

The device also lends itself to evoke an ecstatic moment:

It seemed to him that he heard notes of fitful music leaping upwards a tone and downwards a diminished fourth, upwards a tone and downwards a major third, like triple branching flames leaping fitfully, flame after flame, out of a midnight wood. It was an elfin prelude, endless and formless; and, as it grew wilder and faster, the flames leaping out of time [...] (P 158)

“Succinctly” (U 17.1080)

The gushingly expansive and romantically embellished first part of “Nausicaa” contains poignant interruptions. The three “girl friends” are not as amiable as they are introduced: Edy Boardman in particular is not on good terms with Gerty MacDowell and speaks “none too amiably” (U 13.71). When Gerty misses a kick with a ball, “Edy and Cissy laughed” and Edy Boardman taunts: “If you fail try again.” The response is a paradigm of condensed spite: “Gerty smiled assent and bit her lip” (U 13.360). In a tightlipped curt sentence all the syllables are closed — ending in plosive consonants -t and -p. The structure seems to act out what it expresses. The contrast between a soft “smiled” is pitted against a pert and clipped “assent.” The verb “smile,” basically intransitive, rarely takes an object. A smiled assent is artificially confected anyway.

Such crisp effects can be measured by comparison with their translations, which in this instance can hardly recreate the felicitous pertness. Other languages, without monosyllabic “bit” or “lip,”¹² have to resort to “lèvre,” “labbro,” “labio,” or “Lippen,” ending on unstressed, weak syllables, and so do not phonetically emulate the act. The French “Gerty eut un sourire d’assentiment et se mordit la lèvre,” elongated as it is, begins with an almost friendly tone;¹³ the same is true of German “...lächelte zustimmend und biß sich auf die Lippen.”¹⁴ All translations inspected in this case have recourse to formulations like “smiled assentingly” — which is quite a distance from a contorted and grating “smiled assent.”

An analogous succinct enactment of a physical expression is observed by Bloom: “Richie cocked his lips apout” (U 11.630), and again the impact in part depends on

¹¹ The paragraph looks like an elaboration of a short sentence in *Giacomo Joyce*: “I burn, I crumple like a burning leaf!” *Giacomo Joyce*, with an Introduction and Notes by Richard Ellmann (London: Faber & Faber, 1968) 15.

¹² Translations that have been compared employ an average of 15 syllables as against Joyce’s seven.

¹³ James Joyce, *Ulysse*, traduction intégrale par Auguste Morel, assisté de Stuart Gilbert, entièrement revue par Valéry Larbaud et l’auteur (Paris: Gallimard, 1948, first published 1929) 340.

¹⁴ *Ulysses*, tr. Hans Wollschläger (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975) 496.

phonetic closure and labials. Goulding is about, or apout, to whistle the air of “All is lost now,” pursing the lips forward (not pouting resentfully, as many translations seem to assume).

“Grace of Structure” (*U* 7.768)

The early episodes of *Ulysses* abound in emulative sentences, as when Bloom’s rising excitement on expecting a stylish lady to step on a carriage, and thereby revealing a bit of leg, is rendered in a staccato rhythm: “Watch! Watch! Silk flash rich stockings white.” By contrast, a passing tram intruding and blocking the view is intimated by ponderous obstructive syllables:

A heavy tramcar honking its gong slewed between. (*U* 5.130)

The first sentence would be read quickly, the second with slow, weighty emphasis.

As against such cases, at the other end of the spectrum, airy, unsubstantial processes can be evoked by weightless touches. One of Joyce’s favorite words is “soft/softly,”¹⁵ as at the end of “Scylla and Charybdis,” or in “Sirens”:

Frail from the housetops two plumes of smoke ascended, pluming, and in a flaw of softness softly were blown. (*U* 9.1228)

It [a tuning fork] throbbed, pure purer, softly and softer, its buzzing prongs. (*U* 11.315)

A telling example is Bloom going “under the railway arch he took the envelope, tore it swiftly in shreds and scattered them towards the road. The shreds fluttered away, sank in the dank air: a white flutter, then all sank” (*U* 5.300). The delicacy of the minute event is brought out by ethereal, airy cadences (here represented by separate lines)

The shreds fluttered away,
sank in the dank air:
a white flutter,
then all sank.

“Fluttered” picks up on the previous “scattered them”; it is echoed in “a white flutter”; “sank” pairs with “dank,” not just an echo, but in local reality the air under the Westland Row railway station is indeed dank. The evocative structure in an epiphanic flutter fittingly ends on “sank.” Elsewhere a constellation of scattering and

¹⁵ With 35 occurrences in *Ulysses* alone.

fluttering spells hectic activity: "A bevy of scampering newsboys rushed down the steps, scattering in all directions, yelling, their white papers fluttering" (*U* 7.955).

Still Life

Some descriptions have the appearance of a painting, like Bloom's kettle that he lifts "off the hub and set in sideways on the fire," and then, with stark, heavy outlines, as in a painting:

It sat there, dull and squat, its spout stuck out. (*U* 4.13)

The heavy syllables paint the kettle in all its solid materiality, the sentence seems to demand slow, stressed reading.

A painting may also come to mind when Bloom picks up a book that Molly points to, under the bed. "He stooped and lifted the valance":

The book, fallen, sprawled against the bulge of the orangekeyed chamberpot. (*U* 4.329)

A sprawling sentence in which "sprawled" matches "fallen," but where "fallen" also silently corrects Molly's immediately preceding mistake: "It must have fell down." The vignette ends on a surprise: books are not habitually kept adjacent to chamberpots. The solid, useful, but not inherently romantic object follows a decorative, almost Homeric type of compound, "orangekeyed," which reinforces the contrast.

By the way, it is not easy to determine the precise meaning of "orangekeyed" from a dictionary, and a lot of fumbling is necessary to arrive at the Greek Key or Greek fret, a kind of run-on S-like pattern. Romance languages put the adjective after its noun and have to change the order of words: "vaso del notte, decorato da una greca arancione"¹⁶; "du pot de chambre à grecorange."¹⁷ If the order is "chamberpot (decorated) with a Greek orange pattern," the adventure closes on a classical ornament rather than an anticlimactic down-to-earth toilet utensil.

Unexpected turns characterize Joyce's openings. The first one is directed upwards, as in the Church Latin that Buck Mulligan utters right at the beginning; the words of the Mass should not be spoken on top of a tower by a lay person in a yellow dressing gown, ungirdled. Analogously, Bloom's preferred taste ends in a word that few would be able to anticipate. Grilled mutton kidneys "gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented ...," of all things — "urine." Urine is not what is expected to reside in a palate, it is misplaced.

¹⁶ *Ulisse*. Traduzione e prefazione di Gianni Celati (Torino: Einaudi, 2013) 8.

¹⁷ *Ulysse*, tr. Auguste Morel, 94.

Finally, a book of fiction in close contact with a chamber pot spans a wide spectrum from Literature to physical processes, a characteristic of *Ulysses*.

Terpsichorean Abilities (U 15.1044)

The librarians in “Scylla and Charybdis,” as perceived or transformed by Stephen Dedalus, seem engaged in dance movements, a motif that is turned on right at the outset when, in an approximate chiasmus, Quakerlyster “came a step a sinkapace forward on neatsleather creaking and a step backward a sinkapace on the solemn floor.” Soon afterwards “Twicreakingly analysis he corantoed off” (U 9.5–14), and later, “Brisk in a galliard he was off, out” (U 9.592).

The salient words have long been identified as pointing to *Twelfth Night*: “sink-a-pace” or “cinquepace,” “coranto” and “galliard” are all specific dances which are being mocked:

SIR TOBY BELCH

... why dost thou not go to church in a galliard and come home in a coranto? My very walk should be a jig; I would not so much as make water but in a sink-a-pace. What dost thou mean? Is it a world to hide virtues in? I did think, by the excellent constitution of thy leg, it was formed under the star of a galliard.¹⁸

Quite in tune, the library floor is called “solemn,” possibly a recall of an equally ceremonious Buck Mulligan, “Stately, plump”: “Solemnly he came forward” in the book’s opening (U 1.1–9). As it happens, the ghost of King Hamlet “with solemn march goes slow and stately by.”¹⁹

Being called a “quaker” librarian — which Lyster was not — he is made to quake in a dance rhythm: “The quaker librarian, quaking, tiptoed in, quake, his mask, quake, with haste, quake, quack” (U 9.887). If not quaking, he is creaking, as in “Twicreakingly” above or

— Directly, said he, creaking to go, albeit lingering. (U 9.12)

And even more so towards the end in a rhythmic cluster of serial adverbs:

— Directly.

Swiftly rectly creaking rectly rectly he was rectly gone. (U 9.968)

Elsewhere he “creaked to and fro, tiptoeing up nearer heaven by the altitude of a chopine” (U 9.329), again with Shakespearean overtones. When he takes care of

¹⁸*Twelfth Night*, I, iii.138–44.

¹⁹*Hamlet* 1.2.201.

Bloom arriving in the library, he “took the eager card, glanced, not saw, laid down unglanced, looked, asked, creaked, asked” (*U* 9.589).

Mr. Best is characterized by serial adjectives or adverbs: “Mr Best entered, tall, young, mild, light. He bore in his hand with grace a notebook, new, large, clean bright” (*U* 9.74). “— Ryefield Mr Best said brightly, gladly, raising his book, gladly, brightly” (*U* 9.263). Lyster, who also “springhalted near,” can be tarred with the same stylistic brush: “Portals of discovery opened to let in the quaker librarian, softcreakfooted, bald, eared and assiduous” (*U* 9.961, 230).

Why Joyce depicts two librarians (who actually existed in Dublin reality) in elaborate choreography still remains to be explained.

Ithacan Constellations

“Ithaca” in its arid listings aims at skeletal precision, and, though it has its own intrinsic charm, with a preponderance of Latin-derived vocabulary, it is at the cost of elegance of language. Joyce wrote that the reader will get to know everything, in the coldest way — which is to be taken with a sizeable grain of salt. The episode tends to institute a rational, logical order and thus contains many internal cross-references or correlatives. A report about the relation between Leopold and Molly Bloom is typical:

The parties concerned, uniting, had increased and multiplied, which being done, offspring produced and educes to maturity, the parties, if not disunited were obliged to reunite for increase and multiplication, which was absurd, to form by reunion the original couple of uniting parties, which was impossible. (*U* 17.1963)

The correspondent terms — “parties, uniting, increase and multiply, pro- and educes” — also engage in a reiterative ballet, which is structurally similar to resonant clusters in “Sirens” (see “Miss Kennedy ...”, *U* 11.81, above), but the impact is wholly different — musical in “Sirens,” but almost mechanically pedantic in “Ithaca.”

Concepts are accumulated or contrasted and ricocheting in such density that, instead of the attempted lucidity, the result may be a giddy whirl of permutation.

That it was a Utopia, there being no known method from the known to the unknown: an infinity renderable equally finite by the suppositious apposition of one or more bodies equally of the same and of different magnitudes: a mobility of illusory forms immobilised in space, remobilised in air: a past which possibly had ceased to exist as a present before its probable spectators had entered actual present existence. (*U* 17.1139)

It takes a real effort — and time — to spell out the intended meaning. The scientific, often mock-scientific, procedure may border on parody:

Which example did he adduce to induce Stephen to deduce that originality, though producing its own reward, does not invariably conduce to success? (U 17.606)

The aligned composite verbs, based on Latin *ducere*, are here not signaled in bold type to show that in a hasty reading they might well be overlooked. Such conglomerations may happen inadvertently, but in the sample it has the appearance of a lesson in semantics.

The Ithacan style may deviate into playful parody: as in Bloom's polite refusal of young boy Stephen's invitation for a visit:

Very gratefully, with grateful appreciation, with sincere appreciative gratitude, in appreciatively grateful sincerity of regret, he declined. (U 17.473)

Almost against the grain of Ithacan emotionless precision, the terms seem to conspire to show the insincerity of overdemonstrated gratitude. At some stage, the human feelings, otherwise carefully avoided, can return with an all the more sensual effect:

He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump, on each plumpmelonous hemisphere, in their mellow yellow furrow, with obscure prolonged provocative melonsmellonous osculation. (U 17.2241)

Departing from the predominantly Latinate and therefore distancing diction, voluptuous and homely reverberating words take over. For one short paragraph the manner of "Sirens" seems to be switched on, with provocative neologisms thrown in. The incongruous "smellow," apt in its own odorous impact, is also the result of autogenerative propulsion: "mellow yellow smellow." Even the one Ithacan Latinate term "osculation" (kissing, originally a diminutive, osculum, of "mouth, os) is drawn into the erotic aura. As it happens, the term seems to — but etymologically does not — contain "-cul-," French for anus,²⁰ so that the editor Crawford's exclamation "K. M. A." (U 7.980) would seem be finally put into action by Bloom.

"Repeated Again" (U 16.279)

Repetitions can form an esthetic pattern, as in "Sirens", or may serve a ritualistic purpose, as in the threefold: "Deshil Holles Eamus. Deshil Holles Eamus. Deshil Holles Eamus" (U 14.1) which opens the "Oxen of the Sun" episode. Bloom reflects that "for an advertisement you must have repetition. That's the whole secret" (U 12.1147), no doubt without implying that repetition does in fact "advert" (= turning toward) and therefore direct the mind. Bloom offers an example and an analogy: "Pray for us.

²⁰I owe this comment to Andrew Gibson in conversation.

And pray for us. And pray for us. Good idea the repetition. Same thing with ads. Buy from us. And buy from us" (*U* 13.1122).

A rhetorical sample of balanced reinforcement is paraded in Aeolus, which foregrounds oratorical devices:

... that stony effigy in frozen music, horned and terrible, of the human form divine, that eternal symbol of wisdom and of prophecy which, if aught that the imagination or the hand of sculptor has wrought in marble of soultransfigured and of soultransfiguring deserves to live, deserves to live (*U* 7.768).

The technical terms for the effect are supplied in the description: "His slim hand with a wave graced echo and fall" (*U* 7.772). The poised repetitions are at the other extreme of the jarring proximity of the same terms in "Eumaeus What looks appropriately decorative in "Sirens" or "Scylla and Charybdis" is felt as cumbersome or lack of taut control.

The Bloomian streak in the language of "Eumaeus" (as though, if he could write and tell stories, this would be his way of attempting it), an interior monologue transposed into a literary style with an endeavor to beamusing, loquacious, original or even with a humorous touch ("out of the common groove," *U* 16.1230). The delightful failure is consistently obvious. On occasion a word is lagging in his mind and cannot seem to be replaced, as often happens in speech, so that jarring repetitions or tautologies abound ("some beverage to drink," *U* 16.5).

Accordingly he passed his left arm in Stephen's right and led him on accordingly. (*U* 16.1721)

The reduplication of "accordingly"²¹ is not an intended trope, but mere negligence, and it does not indicate a particular accord between the two protagonists. The same is true about clumsy, not effective, repetitions:

All those wretched quarrels [...] were very largely a question of the money question which was at the back of everything ... (*U* 16.1111)

... it struck him a great field was to be opened up in the line of opening up new routes... (*U* 16.531)

... it struck him, the two identical names, as a striking coincidence (*U* 16.1775, where "struck" and "striking," the two almost identical words, are near coincidences).

²¹One third of all occurrences of "according(ly)" in *Ulysses* are in "Eumaeus," which takes up some 8.5%.

The lagging iteration seems due to fatigued mind, with perhaps a second wind — which brings the style occasionally close to features in “Aeolus.” What is artistry in “Sirens,” even if overdone, comes across as inept in “Eumaeus”:

Mr Bloom promptly did as suggested and removed the incriminated article, a blunt hornhandled ordinary knife with nothing particularly Roman or antique about it to the lay eye, observing that the point was the least conspicuous point about it. (*U* 16.817)

Ironically, the word “point” thereby becomes awkwardly conspicuous. In a sentence like “Mr Bloom, so far as he was personally concerned, was just pondering in a pensive mood,” even readers unfamiliar with Latin or etymology will feel that “pondering” and “pensive” are close relatives.

All through “Eumaeus” there is a consciousness that language does not quite express what it should (the text is studded with “so to speak,” etc.), and at one point the clumsiness of repetition — “... which in Bloom’s humble opinion threw a nasty sidelight on that side of a person’s character” — is commented on with “no pun intended” (*U* 16.171), as though the slip were potentially inspired by any kind of wit.

Alliterations no longer function as a poetic device for acoustic reinforcement but are experienced more as accidental irritations: “You have every bit as much right to live by your pen in pursuit of your philosophy as the peasant has” (*U* 16.1157).

The photograph of his wife that Bloom shows to Stephen “was a speaking likeness in expression but it did not do justice to her figure ...” A few lines later, Bloom leaves “the likeness there for a few minutes to speak for itself” (*U* 16.1444, 1457). Such a doubling might potentially be witty but is more often the outcome of inadvertent negligence, often coupled with failed aspiration. Echoes, as in

Nevertheless he sat tight just viewing the slightly soiled photo creased by opulent curves, none the worse for wear however, and looked away thoughtfully with the intention of not further increasing the other’s possible embarrassment while gauging her symmetry of heaving embonpoint. (*U* 16.1464)

are not devised but simply out of place. In at least one instance a repetition is avoided at the last moment when Bloom imagines a homecoming without a welcome:

Still as regards return. You were a lucky dog if they didn’t set the ...

Clearly the sequence is “set the dog at you,” but the word has just been used figuratively, so that, just in time, an ad hoc replacement is thrown in:

You were a lucky dog if they didn’t set the terrier at you directly you got back. (*U* 16.1339)

A terrier is not particularly ferocious, though it may have faint echoes of (unaffiliated) terror. The one terrier in “Circe,” at any rate, looks tame and benignant: “whining piteously, wagging his tail” (*U* 15.532).

In short, some repetitions are more poetical than others, according to context they can be harmonious or decorative, or else accidentally maladroit, or, as in the parodic interpolations in “Cyclops,” an assumed elevated style can drop bathetically into inept repetition: “Lovely maidens sit in close proximity to the roots of the lovely trees singing the most lovely songs while they play with all kinds of lovely objects ...” (*U* 12.78). This appears to be partially anticipated in one of the pointedly insipid runs of “Sirens”: “He sang that song lovely, murmured Mina. Mr Dollard. And The Last Rose of Summer was a lovely song. Mina loved that song. Tankard loved the song that Mina” (*U* 11.1175). To say nothing of “Love loves to love love” (*U* 12.1493) — all with wholly different repercussions.

Nothing new under the critical sun. We know that Joyce had the requisite skills of a writer. It may have been worth demonstrating what we all know, in scrupulous detail.

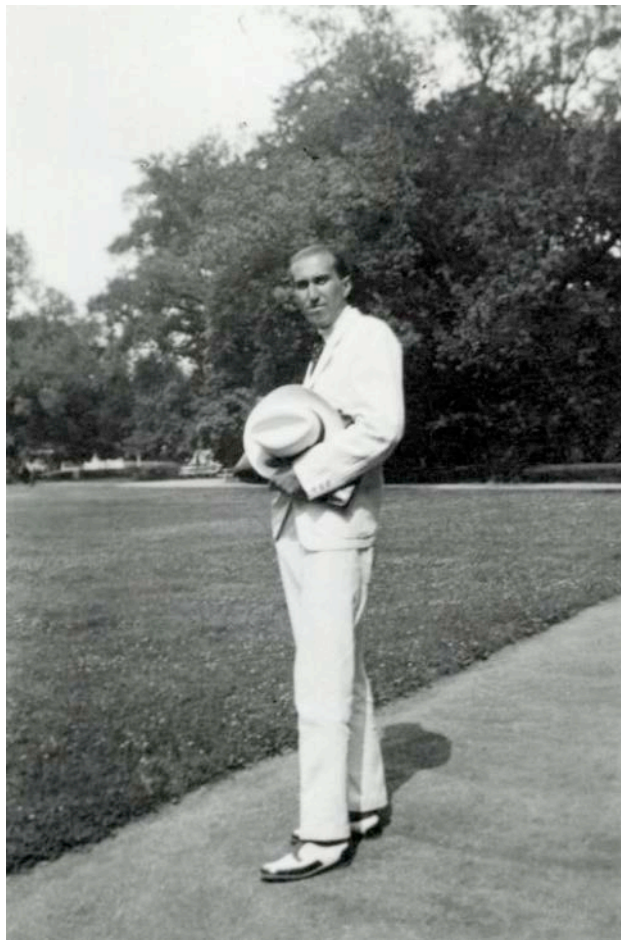
HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

JÓZSEF J. FEKETE

PRAE-PRAE

(BEFORE *PRAE*)



Miklós Szentkuthy

*Everything is in this book. The lyrical intensity of life and, at one and the same time, philosophy at a fairly high, I might say university, level. My main goal was to absorb the problems of modern philosophy & mathematics into modern fashion, love, and all the manifestations of life.*¹ — Szentkuthy

Prae, Miklós Szentkuthy's colossal novel, was 80 years old in 2014, yet only then did it finally appear in translation for the first time. The novel's long incubation in the sheep's pen of its mother tongue is startling since the first year following its publication creative writers and critics in Hungary already recognized that an extraordinary thing had been born from the young writer's pen that in no way conformed to the literary scene of its time. This novel, incompatible as it is with contemporary Hungarian literature, was written between 1928 and 1932, when Szentkuthy (born Miklós Pfisterer in Budapest on June 2, 1908) was still in his early twenties. Behind the work's ambivalent appraisal, reception, and rejection prowled cultural movements so idiosyncratically Hungarian that they were in practice incomprehensible to other people in Europe, and they boiled down to a conflict between two camps known as the "Traditionalists" and the "Urbanists." Populist writers rejected everything that counted as modern at the cost of the loss of individuality (in the communal subject), the personality disintegrating in the wake of many stimuli in the 20th century at a juncture when for a long time it was the main subject of western literature. Moreover, as László F. Földényi said, "In Hungary the bourgeoisie was paper-thin on the body of society,"² and the Urbanists wanted to pin the watchword of Modernism onto their banner in order to match their mode of address and tastes to those of that social stratum, more wishful-thinking than real though it was. Into that literary milieu, stuck with its bipolar, Manichæist view of the world, burst Szentkuthy, having a gut hatred of all dualisms, with a novel that was colossal in size alone and even extremely daunting in not being typeset into paragraphs and which furthermore said nothing about things that could be read of in books published in Hungary at the time. Indeed, the flood of words seething between its covers was not a novel as such but a document preparing the way for writing a novel, which is why it bears the title *Prae*, i.e., *Before* (prior to, in advance of, etc.), or in other words, it deals with what comes before the birth of a novel. That odd state is simplified by the author in the following fashion: "If the title of this writing as a whole

¹ Miklós Szentkuthy, *Prae* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2004). Afterword.

² F. László Földényi, "A perifériáról a centrumba" [From the Periphery to the Centre] 2000 *Irodalmi és társadalmi havilap*, No. 3 (2006).

is *Prae*, does *Prae* have anything to say about what it wants? No. It does not. It does not even come anywhere close to itself.”³

The book stuck out conspicuously from contemporary Hungarian literature, to the point that Szentkuthy was forced to have it printed by a private press. With it, the author created a new path for prose writing not just in Central Europe but on the continent as a whole, which at the same time must have seemed a dead-end street, as Szentkuthy never again employed the method that had been worked out so thoroughly and demonstratively in *Prae*, even though he carried on virtually all of its theories and employed them more or less loosely in his later works.

The question arises as to what would have happened if this work, published in Hungary in 1934, had reached a German readership shortly upon publication? It may also have been translated into other languages and, who knows, through its influence, European literature might have been quite different. It might have been granted the same fate as *The Pendragon Legend*, Antal Szerb’s philological parody of a detective story.⁴ Likewise published in 1934, only after the turn of the millennium (in the UK in 2001; in Germany in 2004) did it begin to be recognized abroad as displaying procedures now largely categorized as postmodern long in advance of Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980 in Italian, 1983 in English).

Neither Joyce nor Proust

There were contemporaries who attempted to appraise and categorize Szentkuthy’s ‘bewildering’ colossus of a novel, but, unsurprisingly, that did not go unhindered since they could find no predecessor in Hungarian literature to which they could compare the ‘misbegotten monster’ *Prae*. It was unprecedented, and nonplussed literary scholars and critics called to their assistance the likes of Joyce and Proust, both of whom were held in similar disrepute. More than one critic asserted that little more was needed to produce *Prae* than a Joycean technique of free association and a Proustian treatment of time.

Later research has demonstrated that these assertions have little foundation since just as few Hungarians read Joyce and Proust as they read Szentkuthy himself. In a study written in 1936, László Németh stated that the influence of those two great literary predecessors was not as pronounced as presupposed: “If one seeks to compare him to one of the great monsters, Kant is much nearer to the mark than

³ *Prae*, Vol. 1 (Contra Mundum Press, 2014) 97.

⁴ Antal Szerb (1901–45), an older friend and fellow scholar of Szentkuthy’s, studied German and English in the 1920s, writing a dissertation on Chesterton and Aldous Huxley as well as *Az angol irodalom kistükre* (An Outline of English Literature, 1929). Because of his Jewish descent, Szerb was deported to a concentration camp late in 1944, which led to his death in January 1945. A year later Szentkuthy commenced writing a novel entitled *Pendragon és Apollo XIII* [Pendragon and Apollo XIII, 1946–47], which only appeared under the imprint of Magvető Kiadó in 2009.

Proust or Joyce. *The Critique of Pure Reason*; in point of fact the self-observation of vacated reason. The mind discards the world and attempts to grasp what has been left behind. By way of an experiment it then snatches some of the world and examines it: space, time, and the categories to chew over.”⁵ One may gather from that proposition that *Prae* is much more philosophy than fiction, at least in the sense of Németh’s concept of fiction. To be more specific, he, too, had difficulty in deciding where to place it, having read only a few of its ‘chapters’:⁶ “Miklós Pfisterer’s novel, if he is not dissuaded in the meantime, will bear the title ‘*Prae*.’ Does he mean by ‘*prae*’ the same as I do? I don’t know.”⁷ Miklós Béládi raised the same question in his article: “what does the title mean ... [?] The novel before later ones, the work that is followed by newer ones. *Prae* is an introduction, a foreword, a sketch of a large work that is to come. A Prelude to the Authentic One... *Prae* is... also a *Non-Prae*... *Prae* contains its own commentary, marginal notes, extension, at times its counterexample, even its refutation.”⁸ The most complete-looking formulation that I have come across to date is the following:

According to Gyula Sipos the explanation of the title (to translate) is: ‘*Prae* as a preamble, preface, prelude (*Ludus preliminaris*), pretext and pre-text, predication and presumption, prefiguration and precursor, précis (a short summary, that is to say, rather, a bulky, self-contradictory manual) and preciousness (mannerism and Baroque). Furthermore: a (alchemical) precipitate; (a gunwale on a Venetian boat), a precombustion chamber (groove) for vaporizing diesel oil, and so much more.”⁹

From all that, however, one still cannot discern what *Prae* is. Anyone with at least a slight acquaintance with Szentkuthy will know that the writer is simplest when he seems to be the most difficult. He himself was greatly amused by scholarly and bookish interpretations:

When my book *Prae* first appeared, even Antal Szerb himself, although he wrote many understanding words about me, ascribed to it all manner of metaphysics, mysticism, and philosophy. The title *Prae* means simply what it says: it alludes to the book being an overture. A multitude of thoughts, emotions,

⁵ László Németh, *Az egyetlen metafora felé* [Towards the One and Only Metaphor], in: *Két nemzedék* [Two Generations] (Budapest: Magvető & Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1970) 554.

⁶ The first edition of *Prae* was not set into chapters but written as a single monolithic block of text.

⁷ László Németh, “Magyar kaleidoszkop,” *Tanú* [Witness] (June 1933); reprinted in *A mítosz mítosza. In memoriam Szentkuthy Miklós*, ed. Gyula Rugási (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2001) 18–20.

⁸ Miklós Béládi, “A *Prae*, vagy regény a regényről” [*Prae*, or a novel about the novel], in: Miklós Béládi, *Válaszutak* [Crossroads] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1983) 220.

⁹ *Prae: Dissémination et montage du roman*, tr. and ed. by G. Sipos. *Le Nouveau Commerce* 38 (Autumn 1977) 123–131. Cited by Pál Nagy, *Az elérhetetlen szöveg. Prae-palimpszeszt* [The Unattainable Text: A Palimpsest for *Prae*] (Budapest: Anonymus Kiadó, 1999) 47.

ideas, fantasies, and motifs are milling and churning around here as chimes, an overture to my subsequent oeuvre.¹⁰

What can be established is that one of Szentkuthy's conceptual cornerstones is Kantian philosophy,¹¹ in respect to which one may draw the first conclusion on the author's method pursued in *Prae*: for Szentkuthy it was not so much the thought that was important as was thinking itself. The young writer was well-versed with contemporary philosophy: Iván Kiss has shown¹² that at the time when he probably began writing *Prae*, his observations and perceptions of the theories of Husserl, Carnap, Heidegger, and several philosophers of the Vienna Circle confirm that he was already familiar with Heidegger's *Being and Nothingness* as well as Carnap's *The Logical Structure of the World*. Szentkuthy was therefore highly conversant with the philosophical discourses of his era,¹³ but at the same time he was not a devotee of phenomenology, logical positivism, mathematical logic, or contemporary philosophy.¹⁴ He later gave testimony of his rejection these in a mordant essay.¹⁵ But already on the very first pages of *Prae* he set himself ironically aside from philosophical impossibilities:

¹⁰ Miklós Szentkuthy, *Iniciálék és ámenek* [Initials and Amens: Tamás Nádor interviews Miklós Szentkuthy] *Könyvvilág* [Book World, 1926–38], No. 11 (1987).

¹¹ In contrast, he (or the narrator) ironically rejects neopositivism and phenomenology at the beginning of *Prae*.

¹² Iván Kiss, *Prae-átló (Szkizofrén akvárium)* [A *Prae* Diagonal (Schizophrenic Aquarium)], MS.

¹³ On the other hand, Szentkuthy was thoroughly acquainted with the works of Walter F. Otto, Karl Reinhardt, Kurt Riezler, Rudolf Otto, Franz Altheim, H.W. Rüssel, Thassilo von Scheffer, Eckart Peterich, and Gilbert Murray's works on the history of religion, and he collected a good few "black notations" of their "geistesgeschichtliche hochdeutsch hochem mítosz-interpretáció" ('High German history of ideas of high myth-interpretation') and in contrast took the side of earlier interpretations of myth. Put simply, he resented the methodology of researchers who, thumbing a nose at temporal, historical, and geographical perspectives and intervals, portray divine figures in such schematic proteanness as if they had not undergone millennia of development, as if the mythological characters had carried their nuances in their very origins themselves, or to put it even more simply: he treats as one and the same "an Orpheus myth in Thrace five thousand years ago and an Orpheus myth in Anatolia five thousand years later." It was in the light of that kind of orientation that he became entangled in an argument with his friend, the classical philologist Károly Kerényi (1897–1973), one of the leading figures in Hungarian historians of antiquity, over a book the latter published in German: *Die antike Religion. Eine Grundlegung* (1940) [*Religion in Antiquity*].

¹⁴ It was ruled out in advance that he would be capable of sticking tenaciously to the precision and citation-prone terminology and conceptual constructions that, in point of fact, take advantage of the German language, and thus of fitting them into the lexicon of his narrative: "It is a fact that a person's first reaction to rebarbative words such as 'Welträumlichkeit' is to cast them aside in disgust, but it's a shame to act so rashly on the matter, because it soon becomes clear that that primeval space is something very impish, putto-esque, coquettish, and mischievous" (*Prae*, Vol. 1 (2014) 445) — i.e., it is far from the essence of philosophy.

¹⁵ *Az újabb magyar filozófiai mérlege* [The Balance of Philosophy in Hungary] (1941–42).

by that time I had read quite a number of books in which philosophy was making its own hypochondria law with a certain grandeur: the concept of a concept, the foundation of foundations, the possibilities of possibilities, the infra-principle preceding the precondition supposing all preconditions, the sense of conjunctions (“*reine Und-heit, absolutes So-tum*”),¹⁶ the most elementary cognitive fundamentals; in short, in puritanical agitation, those books analyzed the whole ‘hyperlogical’ prelogic.¹⁷

Not only did the young author get into a simultaneous dialogue not merely with philosophy and the other intellectual material of his age but he also devoured visual art from the Middle Ages to the Bauhaus, was equally knowledgeable in the field of expressionism and cubism, in biology and theology, physics and architecture, fashion design and psychology. More than consuming facts, he also assimilated them in order to build them into his work by the creative process of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. His boundless demand for reality and his compulsion to write down everything in his own formulation propelled the writing of *Towards the One and Only Metaphor*, which appeared a year after *Prae*: “A *Catalogus Rerum*, an ‘Index of Entities’ — I am unlikely to free myself of this, the most primeval of my desires.”¹⁸ For him the true adventure was the linguistic ingenuity with which million-hued reality can be recorded with total precision.

The whole century is progressing toward wordplay... Wordplay is an expression of the instinct that we consider relations ordained by chance¹⁹ as being much more eternal realities and much more typical beings than the individual things which are the characters of the relationship. One can imagine a new arrangement of the world whereby trees vanish from an alley of trees and only the smudges of touching boughs are left; the constitutive elements disappear from chemical compounds, and lines of bonding force are all that remain as sole material reality... Every right bank and every left bank fades away, but the world is filled up with an endless multiplicity of hard bridges,²⁰ one can read from the pen of Leville-Touqué, a young philosopher and Szentkuthy’s alter ego, near the start of the novel. In what follows it turns out that for the realization of the new objectivity set as the literary goal the author also lined up, alongside his up-to-date philosophical knowledge, the latest findings of the natural scientists of the day. He was conversant with the works of Louis de Broglie, Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, Erwin Schrödinger, and Arthur Stanley Eddington with the fields of quantum theory, atomic physics, and astronomy; he was conversant with

¹⁶ Pure And-ness, absolute So-dom.

¹⁷ *Prae*, Vol. 1 (2014) p. 5.

¹⁸ *Towards the One and Only Metaphor* (Contra Mundum Press, 2013) 2.

¹⁹ In that respect it is not unfounded to conjecture that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of language games (cf. *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus)*, 1921) influenced Szentkuthy’s comments on language.

²⁰ *Prae*, Vol. 1 (2014) 30.

and commented on the theory of Bernoulli sequences and random permutations, Euler's identity, Brownian movement, and Dedekind numbers and related sequences, all of which he endeavored to project onto the terrain of the form of the novel via a spatial concept represented by a homogeneous area called 'narrative space' and 'mobile narrative elements' together with narrative components liberated from the principle of plot, two different logical orders. Perhaps the simplest and most readily comprehensible formulation of this runs as follows: "Every gesture disturbs the homogeneity of space and will yield outlines of varying thickening and rarefaction..."²¹

Szentkuthy was basically dissatisfied with the possibilities of language. Like Borges, he emphasizes the surplus content of words, but unlike the Argentinian writer he does not rejoice in the connotative contents that are as a matter of course present in designations and expressions. In his opinion, language would be precise if it operated like mathematics, bare, and, if, in contradistinction to all accreted semantic content and enrichment, a word only meant itself, and the narrative were also like that, forming merely from linguistic elements stripped down to a basic meaning a structure whose elements of which would be meshed together by association. In Vol. 2 of *Prae* one can read the following witticism:

The world is a model: a Greek bust, let us say. That is what an apprentice (artist) must imitate and express. (I do not disturb the link of the two notions. In said endless-worded language, for example, there would be separate words for all the transitional shades and every scale of dilemma of 'imitation' and 'expression'; or in other words, the relationship of the two words would not be a problem.) The Greek bust is of white marble. Apprentice No. 1 is given a piece of marble on which the features of the model have already been carved and only a few finishing touches are missing. Apprentice No. 2 only gets gray marble with the features barely prepared. Apprentice No. 12 has a tin of white oil paint, a dissertation on Greek drama about satyrs, and Rembrandt's pocket watch, whereas Apprentice No. 3,874 (that is me! Oh, charming happiness of Adamus Chrysotomos Paradisopaccer), has a meteorological timetable, a precise copy of the model composed of fixed gas and a historical hypothesis about how the Jews erased the eleventh commandment from the Bible. What a horrendous task I shall have to complete from these in order to copy the white Greek bust that has been set before me as a model.²²

Eventually, literary historians and critics abandoned the search for the predecessors of Szentkuthy's ideas in Joycean and Proustian parallels to look in entirely different directions. István Lakatos, Béla Pomogáts, and poet István Vas alike

²¹ *Prae* II (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2004) 267.

²² *Ibid.*, 345.

discerned one in Rabelais. However, that kinship was accepted by the writers, but only in respect to the *St. Orpheus Breviary*, although one should be added that in view of its treatment of contemporary philosophy, *Prae* also harks back to Rabelais, who, four centuries before Szentkuthy, had similarly mocked his pseudo-learning of his era. István Vas's ineffectual argument that Szentkuthy and Joyce cannot be kindred because the former is not tied to Hungarian realities and culture in the way Joyce was to Irish life and the English language can be easily discounted. On the other hand, the Rabelaisian profusion that poet and writer Mihály Babits found wanting in Szentkuthy's writing was only remedied by Szentkuthy in his works after *Prae*. Szentkuthy's book differed from other 'weighty literature' inasmuch as it did not seek to be a novel: while certainly excited by what was fashionable in the world, and while love was its central subject, it did not address what was understood by fashionability and love in contemporary novels. The writer and poet Dezső Tandori pointed out the following:

If it is true that Szentkuthy's novel retained, or more accurately, was unable to shake off modishness, one has to note two important 'points' in that connection; following this exchange of words, the novelist's not always punctilious procedure in rock climbing which 'happens' from the steeper, less flashy side of conceptualism. For one thing, if compared to the culture-centered or 'fashionable' works, not to say worldwide successes, of the 1930s, i.e., compared to semi-fantastic, detective, intellectual history, etc., novels and monster essays, one has to rank the advantages of *Prae* inordinately high, miles above in its superiority in that it strives a lot less for attractiveness; more than that, it does not strive at all for that kind of thing. It is not rounded off, there is no message that is definite or can be imposed on it, and yet despite this fact it is still not a stream-of-consciousness novel, etc. In other words, it remains a *formation*; indeed, it *holds up well* as a formation. Additionally, the jarring presence of modish, superficial elements — however much they are worked out, finished, compulsorily novelistic — puts between quotation marks throughout what is otherwise an over-formulation of thoughts, or possibly a conceptual abundance, a swirl of associations of ideas, etc., a charge of unformulatedness that can be leveled on account of their countlessness.²³

Subjective Self-Mythology

Szentkuthy is an artist of representation — not just because from among his contemporaries he went the furthest in his language. But because, in his view, *representation* was the sole possible behavior vis-à-vis life and reality,²⁴ because

²³ Dezső Tandori, "Szentkuthy-tanulmányozás" [Studying Szentkuthy], *Mozgó Világ*, No. 6 (1985) 109–110.

²⁴ Miklós Szentkuthy, *Vallomás és bábjáték* [S.O.B., Vol. 6: *Confession and Puppet*] (1973) 263.

through it a writer does not compromise him- or herself in the suspect maze of either 'historical deeds' or 'basic philosophical principles.'²⁵ The mania for representation, the eager technique of connecting together, naturally also had its creative psychological motives:

TWO things excite my interest: the most subjective epic details and ephemeral trivialities of my most subjective life, in their own factual, unstylized individuality — and the world's big facts, in all their allegorical *Standbild*-like greatness: death, summer, sea, love, gods, flowers. One of the causes of my stylistic confusion is that the subject of my sentence is usually some analytical nicety, a finesse, a pictorial or conceptual paradox — and I pump into the description of the details of those details, in the form of subordinate clauses, compound words and rhythm-killing litanies of epithets, the mythical grand backdrops (sea, summer, death, etc.). I may write down, for example, the particular shape of a woman's lips, and the even more particular lipstick taste on them, and I load the apparatus necessary for that description with the big, more generally interesting facts and problems of life and death, organs and blood pressure, love and artifice. That too is a phobia: I dare not start off with the 'big,' hence the grotesque sentences: the leaden weight of eternity bound up in the hairs of ephemerality. Rather than ten characters in a novel, I describe a single person, and while analyzing that (cravenly!) narrate ten novels in parentheses.²⁶

With Szentkuthy a content of form-innovating modernity can be discovered in the authentic artistic projection of those important, new, socially and historically determined, developmental tendencies that had a significant influence on the human mode of existence. Alongside contemporary modern cubist painting and architecture, one can find the results of theoretical physics and physiological research, even in the fashion magazines that continually recur in his works²⁷ and contain almost a condensation of a scheme of the simplest phenomena in nature and the most refined products of the human brain: "there seem to be three exits for me

²⁵ Ibid., 263.

²⁶ *Towards the One and Only Metaphor* §38.

²⁷ "What is non-problematic art for me? This: an advertisement made up of a colored photograph of Jaeger's women's clothing in the March 3, 1942 issue of the English edition of *Vogue*. There is composition there, what is more, the best; there is erotically convincing reality, there is midsummer night's poetry, there is a refined puritanism, and there is Baroque theatricality! Life does not have voluptuous excitement and sensation does not have the most perfect possible expression there. Two big blots of color: the lower, seated woman is red, whereas the upper one, floating at a visionary height, is blue; the background, the back of a white divan, which in its simplicity is no longer a divan but the material minimum of neutrality, and above it a mixture of a greyish, pearly emptiness blossoming from the gold of dawn, a salon indifference, and the spleen of God before the Creation." *Az alázat kalendáriuma* [The Almanac of Humility, 1935–36] (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1998) 86.

to escape from psychiatry: landscape, architecture, and textile...”²⁸ The latter quote might be explained in the following manner: if the circles around painting, music, and literature were to close separately, then for the reader’s “voluptuous and poignant pleasure,” they would have to be synthesized. Their trinity may be imagined thus: first a micro- or macro-landscape, followed by a bold conceptual leap, by a description of a bizarre architectural masterpiece; out of these he draws generalities, i.e., generates rules to reinforce, out of which he creates a subject plan, rejects it and proposes a newer one, and so on, until he has worked out in detail all his thinking relating to a phenomenon. The method is none other than association, as the phenomenon gives rise to an infinity of thoughts, concepts, historical outlines, or moods. In *Prae*, though, one can discover another interesting technique that plays a significant role in constructing an immanent literary picture of the world. For want of a better word, let this be called the ‘something-in-place-of-something-else’ technique (it is not a matter of *deviation*). For instance, Leville-Touqué, the ‘protagonist’ of the initial two-thirds of *Prae*, sets off for his morning bath, but instead of the act of washing himself clean the reader gets a tract on architecture, phenomenology, ontology,²⁹ and gnosiology, and any pleasure soon turns to shudders under the philosophical shower. At the same time, Leville spends his time reflecting on the possibilities of representation, even conditionally formulating his observations in essays that he has published in the periodical *Antipsyche* — by bringing them up in the novel in actual fact he is creating a work within a work. In “Outline of a Starting-Point, or New Composition” and later “Towards a New Culture of Wordplay, or, Concerning the Rules of Dogmatic Accidentalism,” he writes that in order to create “logical or artistic order” (to simplify it) a new literary methodology based on free associations, differing from all previous methods, a narrative of the subjective reopaling on the objective (and vice-versa) is the most suitable:

... it was then that I suspected with a discoverer’s naïve self-satisfied nose that new possibilities of editing styles are opening up for me; a bit of humorous distortion, on the one hand, and a bit of frivolous decorativeness, on the other, will express the forever desired and indispensable artistic or logical order much more energetically than the parallel wires of the old cage of order.³⁰

Among the things that he writes about the novel we find the following: “A novel’s scope is not identical to the sum range of its narrative elements, but is much greater, just as the basin of an aquarium is greater than the mass of the fishes in it.”³¹ In

²⁸ *Prae* II, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

²⁹ According to Imre Bata, *Prae* is a de-ontologization of the novel (cf. Imre Bata, “A regény regénye, a *Prae*” [*Prae*, a novel of the novel], *Új Írás*, No. 11 (1980) 3.

³⁰ *Prae*, Vol. 1 (2014) 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

contrast to the narrative forced into a time tunnel or historical trap, or in other words into a demonism of time and linearity of narrative, he swears by the classicism of dispersion, for which, once more, curiously, he draws his examples from architecture.³² The peculiarly obligatory and powerless prison of the idealized new narrative appears in the book for, according to his own design, such narrative elements need to be free to occur anywhere within the narrative. On that basis, the work can be reorganized at any time. Szentkuthy's early diagnosis, as he puts it in the mouth of Leville-Touqué, is very sound in putting a finger on the ambivalent nature, the ambiguity, and the openness of texts. Starting with common observations about English poetry as fractals reflecting the essence of the world, the author lingers for 30–40 pages on the world's great verities: love, death, myth, and religion, and the essentially inane small talk of men and women gives an opportunity for that, expressed in dialogue or without. His intention is the creation of a new narrative that denies traditional linear narration. He expresses its essence in the section "The *cantus firmus* of No Word in an abundance of words":

If the person seeking expression is really excited by the absolute poles of life's intelligence and lack of intelligence, then he will usually become talkative, 'verbose,' eliciting the impression that he cherishes words, though it is precisely his tautology (to repeat: only if he is an extraordinarily sensitive and on that account a person seeking to express himself with extraordinary power) that demonstrates that precisely the word is his biggest foe. A person like that very much senses that 'thought' is a tenth-rate phenomenon in comparison with 'cogitation,' so that he constantly pays attention, both in writing and speech, to his cogitations, which are naturally a giant, unbroken thread, with regressions, stutterings, overhaulings, and unpredictable flourishes, extending until the nearest period of unconsciousness (dreamless sleep, death).³³

That ambiguity and openness can also be achieved with a creation that is sparing with words and of a closed structure as an attempt to expand a text into an infinite speech activity (according to Yuri Lotman) can be misleading since, from a linguistic point of view, reality is as a matter of course an infinite speech activity, the mirror of which can only be a finite model: "A necessary precondition for the functioning of a work of art is the presence of a fixation of limits, of completion..."³⁴ Szentkuthy's

³² Szentkuthy was fascinated by architecture, by medieval cathedrals in particular, and therefore that material art was also given a prominent role in his new narrative: "another experimental narrative strives to accomplish the absurdity of placing the various events, totally free of time, as pure spatial elements with the most capricious architectural tricks possible" (*ibid.*, 406–7).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 610.

³⁴ The reference is to a Hungarian translation (*Szöveg, modell, típus*. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1973, 135), which presumably corresponds to the book translated into English as *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977).

prose does not contradict that assertion, but when it comes down to illustrating it — with him the solid composition models the text.

In *Prae*, Szentkuthy had an opinion on this, too:

A 'theme' and a 'novel' are separate genres, and the two have nothing in common: one cannot discover even the remotest relationship between novelists and thematicists... if I had written two chapters (without a 'theme') and afterwards some compositional wheeze or compositional possibility, came into my mind, I did not set the two already written scenes into a structural unity but used the 'structure' as, so to speak, a third scene after the already finished two scenes. The so-called artistic structure was not the skeleton, a coherent system of girders, of the novel, but an independent character, as if the plot line of *Romeo and Juliet* were to turn into one of the active roles of the same tragedy. The composition thereby becomes unending, it proliferates forever, constantly changing shape, incorporating everything, but at any moment it might also lose everything, but this structure elevated into a separate character will float as a cork ornament above the eternal foam of this continuum of elaborations...³⁵

Just as in philosophy a thing can only be completed with its anti-thing, so a theme can only burst into leaf in a negation-of-theme, the author acknowledges, returning to his notion in *The Almanac of Humility*:

One can sense here seeing a microscopic precision of observation and some kind of hypochondriac realism as being in perfect equality of rank, but that is precisely why — and this is the paradox of impressionism — there is something wholly hallucinatory too, a negation of reality and of the apropos. Not thematic fidelity, but thematic negation, sadistically sharpened thematic annihilation.³⁶

Thus, from a draft, Szentkuthy created a malleable, amorphous work, which set a boundary only in terms of the length of text and occasional presages of the outlines of the elements of the composition. Along with that, however, he created the plan for a novel which comes into genuine interaction with the reader and, for all its intellectual posing, demands of its readers that they should together concoct the work, with the author contributing to the work's creation process the compositional skeleton and thematic textures, and readers — their creative reading. Naturally, Szentkuthy was not the first person to proclaim the tenet of literary theory that a work of art cannot be created without the interaction of writer-text-reader, but although the precept is valid for all works, he took pains in his novel to stress that interaction to the extent that, in the event of a momentary slackening of attention, a reader will lose his or her way in the labyrinth of the text and afterwards would in vain look for the thread to set them back on the right path.

³⁵ *Prae*, op.cit., 12.

³⁶ *Az alázat kalendáriuma* [The Almanac of Humility], op. cit., p. 9.

Novel or Philosophy?

There is more to be said about the nature of the text, but first one ought to define *Prae's* genre. I have already suggested that, on the basis of the scope of the knowledge that it covers, the tyranny of the method, and the treatment, one might even consider it to be philosophy since Szentkuthy, following Kant's example, also tried to set the phenomena of the world into a well-grounded system. Beside its philosophical character, one can also see that, by virtue of its lack of plot, *Prae* can be subsumed into ever-expanding categories of literary theory. So, when it comes down to it, what is *Prae*? A novel or philosophy, or even some variant of art prose, a narrative mutation or anti-novel?

It is no accident that the question is raised, because when the second edition was printed (1980) the sporadic analyses that saw the light of day incessantly revolved around that idea, with interviewers pinning the writer down to the same question with stubborn illogicality. That is perhaps not surprising since readers had not previously encountered such a slab of philosophical, mock-philosophical, or pseudo-philosophical (or seemingly incomprehensible?) thinking in a Hungarian novel. It is easiest to call anything one does not understand philosophy.

Indisputably, however, *Prae* is neither philosophy nor a proclamation of a philosophy. With Szentkuthy it is not a matter of propagating an idea, of a literary underpinning of a theoretical system — on the contrary, it is a matter of taking into account and clashing with contemporary modern philosophies (and indeed philosophy dating back to the Greeks). The novel builds on philosoph(ies), but the author does not stick to any one philosophy. He can make a reader almost believe s/he has recognized the turn of thinking in question and the writer has been caught red-handed in a confession of life, but then a few words from Szentkuthy turn what has just been said inside out, give philosophy and reader alike a nose-flick. The all-analyzing mind gazes at us from behind invented works of invented philosophers (caricatures — *pace* Rabelais! — of the *real* works of *real* philosophers), and all that the reader can observe of this is a reflection of reason in the mirror of the mind — a subjective self-examination of the subject. One may recognize in *Prae* the philosophical systems of Heidegger, Nietzsche, Klages, Bergson, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard *inter alia*,³⁷ but I see the 'cornerstones' of *Prae* as consisting rather of the following elements:

³⁷ In the course of his study on the philosophical foundations of *Prae*, Imre Bata noticed that Szentkuthy categorically rejects Platonism: "If Szentkuthy dismissed any philosophy it was Platonism. He does not reject Plato, but his dualism, all dualism, and that impatience follows from ontological monism. Szentkuthy is surprised by nothing; he is tolerant of all ideas and only roundly curses dualism... Szentkuthy's expressive goal is the bringing to life of a work of art which is a homogeneous life that has no need of transcendence and, above all, not of the Manichean dualism of good and evil, in order to be able to create an ontologically based world concept that is realized with

- 1) The flowering of European philosophy. Let us stress that in Szentkuthy's terminology flowering is almost instantly expanded to take in its antipode, viz. flowering — withering.
- 2) The achievements of theoretical physics and the results of biological research. The author calls gaining familiarity with quantum theory an antibiotic against philosophy; his discovery of ever tinier components of the world that he reported on not only by eager leafing through the writings of Einstein, Max Planck, de Broglie, Eddington, James Jeans, and Werner Heisenberg, but also by practical experience obtained with microscopes lent by fellow university students. As he was unable to check the new theorems of atomic physics in a laboratory at home, he oriented himself toward botany, meanwhile digesting biology from the universalism of Paracelsus to the paper by Raoul Francé³⁸ on the sexual life of primitive animals.
- 3) The English and French cathedrals and the most modern cubist architecture seen on a grand tour of Europe with his father in 1928, and a later stay in London on a Hungarian scholarship in 1931–32 to complete his doctoral dissertation, equally stimulated the author's attraction toward structure, as did his inquiries into material structure. The sight of the Bauhaus in Germany and 'cubist' buildings in Vienna, Prague, Antwerp, and Paris left an indelible mark on him.
- 4) Fashion magazines of the day can also be seen as structurally inspiring in the same context, their ultramodern creations displaying an almost organic connection to the accomplishments of modern science and the productions of the modern arts.
- 5) Modern painting of the period, above all the art of Picasso, and the music of the early 20th century, were likewise among the stimuli for *Prae*, tipping him less toward the avant-garde as toward the opposite: he recognized that centuries before artists had understood and cultivated the most modern solutions and goals. (The most direct example of that was Szentkuthy's discovery of approaches of the most modern dramatists in the plays of Elizabethan-era Ben Johnson.) The inspiration of modern art thereby came into direct connection with the universal history of art.
- 6) It can be seen that whereas the author 'fell for' modern science he had had serious reservations about modern art. That may have been ascribable to his acquaintance with antiquities of the Oriental collections of the British Museum in London making him realize that culture extended beyond the borders of Europe; indeed, that true civilization, true culture, was not born in Europe.

moral pathos and to be able to persuade it to function, because the work that he created can be interpreted as its automatism (in *Prae* he also expounded on epistemology, the theory of knowledge), and he has his own hierarchy, which naturally is spontaneous (*Prae* is also an axiological totality!)" (Imre Bata, *op. cit.*).

³⁸ Raoul Heinrich Francé (1874–1943) was an Austria-Hungarian botanist, microbiologist, natural and cultural philosopher.

- 7) Finally, I have to place here, albeit as a separate factor, the time of the writing of the work, which induced *Prae* as a structuring element. "Partly on the basis of my travels³⁹ and partly imbibed from my reading, one of the fundamental motifs of *Prae* is the antithesis of England and France... One of the main protagonists of *Prae* is a Frenchman: Leville-Touqué, the other is the Englishman Halbert... In it were articles of the *Times Literary Supplement* and their critical spirit — in it were the marvels and excitement of the English Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals — in it was English Baroque poetry of the 17th century — in it was the spirit of Chesterton as he radiates from his works a humorous, paradoxical, fantastic, playful, somersaulting, scholastic Catholicism. In it, of course, was the poetry of John Keats — I remember that in my teaching days I taught the children Keats' poems as an article of faith. In it was Shakespeare, and in it was Ben Johnson, about whom I wrote my doctoral dissertation."⁴⁰

All those factors contributed oddly to the fact that in Szentkuthy's novel, instead of protagonists, the focus is placed on a non-mimetic novel, an experimental novel, which, in the rays of its self-defining laws, expresses humanity, in its every glint and quiver — the subject, the thinking and feeling subject. In point of fact, *Prae* is an experiment aimed at creating a new culture.

Before *Prae*

Szentkuthy's novels take shape 'before the reader's eyes.' The writer can pick and choose among stories and topics, illustrate and comment on them. He then discards

³⁹ Lóránt Kabdebó showed great understanding in a thorough discussion of those journeys as inspirational factors for *Prae*: "The author makes two mentions of two journeys, and the nature of the two different experiences were an inspiration of the book's ... duality. The first trip is a big inventory, a timeless pondering, its figures enjoying the possibilities of the present and living the life of a fashionable intellectual: beyond getting his bearings as he grew out of adolescent traditions and regarding everything still in its indivisibility, but drawing from this his reckonings of adulthood questioning the transience of life. Leville-Touqué, Leatrice, and their companions are what might be called 'gilded youth.' He was equally at home in the novels of Aldous Huxley, Joyce, Antal Szerb, András Hevesi, Tibor Szobotka, or Jenő Rejtő, who wrote detective stories under the pseudonym P. Howard. His enclosure in the English world after his second trip, the turning in on himself, the need to summarize his tangled experiences, helped him finish and round out the novel. That is when time makes an appearance, and through it ethics is embodied. Ethics: that is, the composition. One of the fops, Halbert, has a father who is an Anglican vicar in Exeter and *Prae* closes with his Meditations, thus the ironic chatting of the young men switches to the 'old' man's meditation.' The composition of *Prae* is thereby fully accomplished: with the 'old' vicar of Exeter: the timeless openness of space is held in a frame by the awareness of transience of temporal closedness." See Lóránt Kabdebó, "Mibe harap a posztmodern kelgyó?" [What is the Postmodern Snake Biting Into?], *Tiszatáj*, No. 2 (1997).

⁴⁰ Miklós Szentkuthy, *Frivolitások és hitvallások* [Frivolous Confessions] (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1988) 325–26.

the partially polished story in favor of a fresh possibility. With its ‘novel-within-a-novel’ technique, it juxtaposes intention, notion, study, essay, preconception, and anti-conception. In a surreal-Baroque composition the deliberate relativization of regularity and irregularity is called upon to emphasize the relativity of intelligence compromised by reality (the realization that sets off avant-garde movements), its random value, and its validity. With Szentkuthy the definitive acceptance and development of chance⁴¹ occupies the place of human sentimentality, the psychological novel. If it is literature, let it be baroque rather than any ism, the author avows:

Modern literature totally lacks theme and expression, the immediate, raw, combative antithesis of reality and literature. If nowadays I read an average novel, on the one hand, I have no sense at all that the world consists of reality (trees, death, stars, loving couples) and, on the other hand, expressions of that (poetry, mathematics, etiquette, et cetera). I do not sense behind the novel the irrational and exciting specificities of reality, the desperate battle of formula and ornament, thought and word, to conquer the incomprehensible world that needs to be understood. Nor does either reality or language come to mind — and that is why I do not sense it to be literature.

The chief merit of baroque poetry, by contrast, is precisely that reality and its pertinent expression always appear in the form of a life-and-death struggle.⁴²

We can reach an understanding of *Prae* by way of a detour since that was not the author’s first work. Szentkuthy wrote his very first novel, at the age of 18, in 1927, titling it *Barokk Róbert*; it was only published posthumously in 1991 by Mária Tompa, his former assistant and now director of the Szentkuthy Foundation. The manuscript, which remained an incomplete torso after being set aside, dates from a year before starting work on the writing of the ‘monster’ novel *Prae*, which became a ‘scandalous touchstone’ of Hungarian literature in 1934. It was itself an already mature work, more precisely, the creation of an author of lively intellect and sentiment who was maturing into a scholar. The novel, which Szentkuthy on several occasions called a diary and also treated as such, provides innumerable philological guideposts for interpreting *Prae*. For example, it decides from the very outset any dispute over whether *Prae* is an indigenous surrealist creation or already a borrowing, a second-hand Hungarian version of an ism. Thus, making his own way, he got to an

⁴¹ “Art for me is an ecstatic passivity as against the wish of science and politics continually to do more. The essence of art is not creation at all, and a desire to be creative is only a post-neurotic syndrome, a side effect. Its essence is a certain way of looking at things, an inner, ‘cultic’ trance, *an ability to accept* the world, that peculiar drunken state in which one is able to say ‘yes’ to the world for all its repleteness with illness, death, and ‘insolence of office.’ In my belief this ungroundable, irrational experience of *acceptance* is the center of beauty, of art.” See *Az alázat kalendáriuma* [The Almanac of Humility] 124.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 333.

experimental literary form free of genre, which breaks free from the strictures of the traditional novel.

In his plan the young Szentkuthy sought in *Baroque Robert* to use the influence of an unhappy marriage and his parents' lack of love for each other as a way of showing how that influenced a son who was sensitive to art. To that end he set about describing the world surrounding him, rounding off his petty-bourgeois novel. But from the very outset it vibrated with an ironic streak in relation to such a description per se, while at the same time conveying disgust with the world itself. For that reason, all of a sudden he turned inwards, starting with a precise self-examination, analyzing his religiosity, his faith, his talent, his sensitivity, his behavior, his deeds, and his imagined actions. The novel's object, therefore, departing from the original intention, turned out not to be a description of the effect of the real world but of Baroque Robert himself, who daydreams even in the course of self-analysis, elaborates invented situations, simulates dialogues, dramatizes moods. The novel's closing chapter is on the verge of psycho horror: the soul, striving for sainthood but continually exposed to temptations, contrives ever-newer trials and torments in the interest of his purification and adolescent clarification. That chapter, the second and last in the volume, could have borne the title of *Baroque Robert in Purgatory* as Szentkuthy planned his first novel to be spread over three chapters. In Chapter 1 space was to have been given to the adolescent's erotic phase, which would distract him from religion and nudge him into the sphere of the arts. That was *Baroque Robert's Descent into the Inferno*. In Chapter 2, the one summoning the purifying fires of purgatory, Baroque Robert makes his appearance as an ascetic who resolves, whatever happens, to become a saint through thick and thin, and, failing that, at least a scholar, but under no circumstances an artist.

At the center of the planned Chapter 3 was to have been the phase of 'tranquil love,' i.e. paradise, yet for that Szentkuthy lacked the necessary life experience; the self-analytical and self-mortifying grammar-school boy was still wrestling with himself between eroticism and asceticism.⁴³

Szentkuthy was already dreaming of a book of over 1000 pages long (a complete *œuvre*), stating that "literature needs three things: humanity, morality, and a talent for synthesis. Not decorations, the music of language, which is already boring by the second sentence, not colored vision."⁴⁴ That was something he still subscribed to

⁴³ Using a favorite trope of Szentkuthy's, the struggle between eroticism and asceticism is no less than Jacob wrestling with the 'angel of Esau,' which was to be a constant motif of his self-inquiries, starting with *Baroque Robert*, which he wrote at the age of 18 years about his 17-year-old self.

⁴⁴ "These scenes are marked out to represent and illustrate, which is one of the healthiest phenomena in the life of the modern mind and, above all, the conception of history, namely, a clever and what one might call the sole redeeming synthesis of the concept of *Civitas Dei* and the *Ship of Fools*. The essence of this way of looking at things is that it simultaneously views history as rational

nearly sixty years later. Strict rules, composition, good style, etc. are all necessary, but the greatest works were all born out of unconcern with art. After all, “art is not pedagogics. It is *not* a nice nursery-school teacher babbling through the catechism! The goal of art is only entertainment, rapture, forgetting.” Szentkuthy asserts this in *In the Footsteps of Eurydice*⁴⁵ in the epoch of ‘tranquil love,’ after half a century of disillusionment with existence, history, and art,

since jointly re-starting on *Prae*!⁴⁶ with jocular indifference we have broken *with every artistic* ambition. Only reality just as it was experienced, seen, heard, touched, orgied (her diary! my diaries!). That was all we were interested in. Only our most personal, physical, and mental health and happiness that we could attain. Such an anti-*ars* and anti-*poetica* breed is the least blindly individualistic and deafly egotistical animal species in the world! Those who (like Orfeo-Medale)⁴⁷ strive so hard for ‘private happiness’ (John Cowper Powys...), who aim for an assurance of happiness of their life, tossing away all ‘artistic’ considerations to the very bottom of Lethe’s waters of forgetting: wish *of others*, with the most passionate sympathy and empathy, blithely boisterous, and cheerful-furious activity, a similarly healthy euphoria.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, on a number of occasions during the writing of *Baroque Robert*, Szentkuthy drafted an encyclopedia-style entry about himself in which he introduced the successful future writer/scholar of genius, i.e. he interrupted the continual self-analytical process of writing with to show off an arc of synthesis. Already then, at 18, at the start of the first novel, he was taking stock of the inner motors of his individual temperament and his works, the asceticism, the eroticism, the sensitivity, the proclivity to obscure philosophizing, and its rejection — which would culminate in the pages of *Prae*.

The oeuvre was eventually to substantiate the seriousness of Szentkuthy’s adolescent plans and designs. Already in *Baroque Robert* one can read the original plan, the *præ*-conception, of the structural layout of the *œuvre* to come:

on a ‘theological’ plane, or at least abundantly freighted with concrete metaphysical content, and as overly compromised with nonsense, burlesque irrationality, and vegetative confusion ... one has come to realize the decisive importance of the strength and value of irrationality — alike with those of rationality — in history” (*Az alázat kalendáriuma* [The Almanac of Humility] p. 52).

⁴⁵ *Euridiké nyomán, op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁴⁶ For the second edition of *Prae* in 1980 Szentkuthy and Mária Tompa undertook the task of breaking down the single block of text of the first 1934 edition into smaller units and appending a detailed index of contents. Szentkuthy himself had written an index for the first edition, which was printed as a separate 15-page brochure by the Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda (Hungarian Royal University Press) following their printing of the novel.

⁴⁷ Mária Tompa, the inspiration for the name Maria Montemedale, is presented in the novel as Szentkuthy’s literary assistant.

⁴⁸ *Euridiké nyomán, op. cit.*, p. 36.

What I need is a secure house, secure knowledge, a rock. Truth. That has to be conquered: it is not easy, nor is it hard. Brains and self-discipline are what are needed. Then it can be done. Once I know the truth, then the poetry can come, the picturesque, the art, the sweet girls. The muses. First the meat of truth and only after that the bonbons of art. What is the *Monumenta Catholica*?⁴⁹ My fervent plan: huge 1,000-page tomes in which the entire Catholic doctrinal theology, scriptural science, the divinity of Jesus Christ, a critique of the writings of all — are you getting this — all stupid philosophers. Protestantism, the Oriental poetry-religions, the Byzantine question, *l'art pour l'art*, pacifism and spiritualism: in a word, everything imaginable that has a relation to religion. The basis for that series: the system of Catholic theology and its defense. Then all the attacks along the Luther-Voltaire-Lenin front and their detailed refutation. Naturally, ever-newer volumes would be brought out to embrace the individual refutations, on by one, of the entire anti-Catholic literature.⁵⁰

From that quotation it is clear that here the adolescent Baroque Robert is right in the throes of religious piety and planning his scholarly work, yet the artist in Szentkuthy would also have planned it in that way as everything can already be found in the above passage: humanity, history, nature, love, art... i.e. everything that the scholar and artist accepted in his own peculiar system and thereby tried to digest the world. To do that his intellect naturally compiled data from a thousand places on the principle, formulated very early on that 'a person does not have to live but has to write!'; in other words drawing more from figurative, transmitted material than from direct experience. That this did not turn into literature for salons or a dry catalog can only be put down to the creator's intellect.

A large part of the text of *Baroque Robert* is made up of self-analysis elicited by a religiosity that was already inclined to the pathological and striving for ultraprecise self-knowledge. In these parts the author gives an account of his increased sensitivity and makes no secret of his emotionalism. That emotionalism, however, is far from defining either the structure or the style of the text because that is precisely what 18-year-old Szentkuthy profoundly despised in his own writings and in the work of others and for that reason did all he could to avoid it. Even in the diary-like, near-confessional passages, where the author is almost making a confession, he continually breaks the subjective character of the communication and shifts the natural perspective of the story. In *Baroque Robert* one encounters neurotic analysis, whose theoretical framework Szentkuthy put into words much later, in *The Almanac of Humility*: the two kinds of analysis, let us call them: the microscopic and the

⁴⁹ *Monumenta catholica pro independentia potestatis ecclesiasticae ab imperio civili* [Catholic Traditions For the Independence of Ecclesiastic Power from the Civilian Empire] (14 volumes, 1847–71) by Count Ágoston Roskován (1807–92), a Roman Catholic Bishop of Nyitra in Hungary (now Nitra in Slovakia).

⁵⁰ *Barokk Róbert* [Baroque Robert] (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1991) 226.

neurotic.⁵¹ The latter supplies the common form of the entire ‘Spanish’ accumulation, a Góngora accumulation,⁵² baroque theology, and a Jewish inclination to atomize.

A neurotic is in the state of water under very high pressure in a pipe: full of tiny bubbles, hissing foam, gray froth. If such a brain is confronted with, say, a flower petal, a theological truth, an erotic gesture, or an idea for an epic poem, then it will clutch on to that sliver with the tenacity of the expiring, since the other parts of the world are in darkness — the brain’s grey bubbling and hissing numbness draws a curtain over the whole of reality. Neurasthenics frequently complain that their range of vision is very narrow: Gongora theology, and the Habsburg concept of politics are all the result of a hypochondriac narrowing of horizons; as a matter of fact, the most banal form of a fear of death, a *Denkphobie*...⁵³ That is why he analyzes, that is why he clings desperately and with tautological staticism to a single detail, because he fears to go further: he has a dread of logical and conceptual agoraphobia as the thought of advancing is unable to advance in a direction other than death, and therefore it avoids the lethal direction.⁵⁴

The novel seeks to be a promising pre(*præ*)condition, a new start, a new creation, where thinking is compensated for by the symbiosis of the mind and senses. The enormous basin where a dense “primitive mass” of scraps of thoughts and of impacts of feelings constantly takes on ever-newer structures while their completely accidental relationship is an always identifiable, acceptable vehicle of sense, as it approaches the same thing from ever-differing aspects and thereby it attempts to objectify by means of extreme subjectivity, the reality of being thrown into life. The inward expansion of reality, toward deep psychology and the intellect — this storm of consciousness — bespeaks surrealism, or more particularly the intellectual version of surrealism, which is no longer spontaneity avowed as a basic principle. The plot of *Prae* (as it does actually have one) protests against the alliance with Surrealism as there is nothing of the fantastic or mystical in it, not even the merely strange. It stands full-square on the ground of reality and almost seeks out the most ordinary, most banal situations, the flatness of which is turned by the praise of accidentalism⁵⁵

⁵¹ In point of fact a continuation of *Az egyetlen metafora felé*.

⁵² This refers to the *culteranismo* (cultivated Lutheranism) of Spanish Baroque lyric poet Luis de Góngora y Argote (1561–1627) and others, which aimed to use as many words as possible to convey little meaning or to conceal meaning.

⁵³ Phobia of thinking.

⁵⁴ *The Almanac of Humility*, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

⁵⁵ “What is this? A literary plan? No. Perhaps a counter-plan? Even less. I have to find an area that is equidistant from living life and created art. With ‘topics’ like that I want to express the dreadful reality of every moment, every sensation, and the terrible lie of every *series* of moments, every *whole*... all that is for me the totality of sensory realization, to which I am faithful with religious absurdity, faithful, but only to the moment, a moment can never have continuations or consequences: a moment does not represent anything, it is just reality, without cause or sense” (AoH, 203–204).

into the esthetic. Imre Bori devoted a whole study to Szentkuthy's analysis of surrealism.⁵⁶ In this the following can be read: the statements which form the center of Szentkuthy's system also designates *Prae* to be a creation of unparalleled significance in Surrealist world literature, as classic a document as the novels and book of essays of Aragon and André Breton or the investigations of Marko Ristić⁵⁷ and Koča Popović⁵⁸ in the domain of irrational phenomenology. It was Breton who in his *First Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924 proclaimed:

when by methods yet to be determined we succeed in realizing the dream in its entirety ... when the dream's curve is developed with an unequalled breadth and regularity, then we can hope that mysteries which are not really mysteries will give way to the great Mystery. I believe in the future resolution of these two states — outwardly so contradictory — which are dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a surreality, so to speak, I am aiming for its conquest, certain that I myself shall not attain it, but too indifferent to my death not to calculate the joys of such possession.⁵⁹

Can this be anything other than a surrealist *præ* state of creation?

Prae is a laying of the foundations for a whole theory of surrealism — that is, the variant exposition by Szentkuthy, because, after all, the entire taxonomy of associations is present in *Prae*, and the typologies of memory and desire, a summary of the laws of their connections is also given; moreover, it even brought a terminological revolution:

it would be possible to prepare a short encyclopedia of the surrealist esthetics of all that (the birth of associations and their connections with the *præ* state, the associations with starting and understanding, the progress of memory and the kinesis of the mind, the nature of a 'reborn dream,' a catalog of dreams, the dilemmas of desire and their resolution in dreams, etc.) as fresh proof of the original line of development of Hungarian surrealism.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Imre Bori, "Az Ezeregyéjszaka ébren álmodói" [The Waking Dreamers of a Thousand and One Nights], in: *Bori Imre huszonöt tanulmánya* [Twenty-five Studies by Imre Bori] (Novi Sad: Forum Könyvkiadó, 1984).

⁵⁷ Marko Ristić (1902–84) was a Serbian Surrealist who started corresponding with Andre Breton in 1923, around the time of the publication of Breton's first *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924).

⁵⁸ Konstantin 'Koča' Popović (1908–92), who moved to Paris in 1929, became active in both the French and Serbian Surrealist groups.

⁵⁹ Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971) 66–75.

⁶⁰ Imre Bori, *op. cit.*, pp. 187–188.

***Prae* and the Experimental Novel**

In Bori's opinion, this new narrative in construction, which functioned at surrealism's level of consciousness, was not so much akin to the works of Proust and Joyce but more a preview of endeavors of narrative in the mid-20th century. Here one can only suppose he had in mind experimental novels. To Miklós Béládi, what is truly interesting in *Prae* is not so much that it turns toward the baroque, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and surrealism, as that it has motifs which foreshadow the *nouveau roman* and the anti-novel. According to Béládi, *Prae* is not a surrealist work:

Except for some inserts on the theory of the novel, *Prae* is an anti-surrealist creation... A surrealist is a happy, blessed soul. He may deny it, but first and foremost he creates a new world: he offers the reader a wonder land, a paradise, with the belief of an apostle, the founder of a religion, a magic priest of poetry... Szentkuthy's *Prae* shows no relationship to this surrealism. One of the basic principles is that one has to break with logic, and a work should be regarded as a chance gift, for the writer's chief effort is directed precisely at eliminating chance and accomplishing a new kind of harmony of phenomena and laws."⁶¹

Pál Nagy, in a major study that compares *Prae* to *À la recherche du temps perdu* and *Finnegans Wake*, links Szentkuthy's undoubtedly forward-looking experiment to the realm of the experimental novel:

A realist novel informs one about reality, an experimental novel brings a reality into being. It does not describe but creates (Robbe-Grillet). A modern work of writing thus becomes a utopia (Barthes). That is the psychological reason why writers look on tomorrow as being the time for writing, and a work that has just been completed as being merely preparation: the big work is adjourned for another day (Barthes)... What has been said above also relates in good measure to *Prae*. Not only did Szentkuthy write the representative experimental novel of the first third of the 20th century,⁶² but also in a certain sense — 25 years before anyone else — the first *nouveau roman*. Perhaps that explains why he has little liking for the French new novel: he felt that much earlier he had written a text of a kind that the *nouveau romanciers* were only now experimenting with... He has no sense that Robbe-Grillet, Beckett & Co. radicalized everything that experimental novels — *Prae* among them — had proposed early in the century (here one is thinking of description, metaphor, construction, protagonists, time, etc.) and attempted to bring 'impossible literature' into being. With them chronological order is replaced by morphological order; they employ the method of serial construction; they write systematic prose; in their novels the characters transform into personal pronouns... The primacy of the eye, of vision, is realized;

⁶¹ Miklós Béládi, *op. cit.*, pp. 226–228.

⁶² Ferenc Takács considers *Prae* to be a virtual novel. See Takács Ferenc, "A Comedy of Ideas. Miklós Szentkuthy: *Prae*," *Hungarian Literature Online* (May 1, 2012).

prefabricated meaning is deleted. With them experimentation itself undergoes a transformation: it becomes an investigation, a disclosure; mobile structures and polyphonic writing (Michel Butor) are introduced, naïve records are eliminated (Dina Dreyfus), nothing is said about Nothing (Bernard Pingaud), people speak in the first person singular instead of the third person singular (Barthes), etc.⁶³

Prae has a presentiment of the outlines of a reality alongside the reality that is forced into logical frameworks. In Szentkuthy's opinion, the scientific way of thinking in Europe and modes of thinking to date are inadequate for the investigation of reality, the uncovering of an anti-world and anti-thing, and, together with that, the implementation of the totality of life. Obviously that totality has to be sought not outwardly, in the material world, but in the human mind, in visions, in senses, in dreams, in insanity. The internal, truer reality, however, is induced by a motif of the external world (and that fact may be appreciated as a parallel to Proust's world). Leville-Touqué, for example, senses a new style of novel on seeing a woman's hat which in fact resembles a radio structure or an excised and nickel-plated network of blood vessels:⁶⁴

The two components, the skeleton theory and the mass of emotions, suddenly combined in an odd resultant, to wit, an unexpected, strange, seemingly completely nonsensical pictorial fragment, or, to be more accurate, an enlarged metaphor. I saw two or three giant sunflowers with large, black carpals and short, golden-yellow ray-florets which were placed, crumpled and almost smoking, over a small, pale-blue lakelet like long plumes and crowns above and around the crest in a heraldic device.⁶⁵

The first component is the path leading from the experience of the sunflower fragment to its expression (with Szentkuthy it should be borne in mind that expression always has three 'unrelated' starting points). *Biological involuntariness* (the sunflower metaphor) is followed by rational absolutism, the sketchiness of the absolute theme and every theme-like theme. The thematic structures are followed by the big picture of *absolute evocativeness*. Finally comes the linking up of the three unconnected starting-points, the necessary relativization of continuity and discontinuity. The polarization of good and evil,⁶⁶ the dialectics of ethical

⁶³ Pál Nagy, *Az elérhetetlen szöveg. Prae-palimpszeszt* [The Unattainable Text: a *Prae* Palimpsest] (Budapest: Anonymus Kiadó, 1999) 20–21.

⁶⁴ As if he had dreamed of one of the works of art prepared by the so-called anatomical plastination process of the German anatomist Gunther von Hagens (b. 1947).

⁶⁵ *Prae*, Vol. 1 (2014) 4.

⁶⁶ Through Szentkuthy's rejection, according to Imre Bata, of the dualism of Plato, though naturally he takes account of it; indeed, in the somewhat later plan for the volume in the *St. Orpheus Breviary* entitled *Ágoston olvasás közben* [While Reading Augustine] (1st edn 1939), he delves very thoroughly into the philosophy of neo-Platonism.

classifications, the nerve-racking consciousness of the gradability of sin and virtue, all raise constant doubts. *Prae* and non-*Prae*, world and anti-world, thing and anti-thing are other similar concepts and conceptual fragments once more conjure up the ways of looking at principles established by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Bergson. Those thoughts are of interest here not on account of their idealism but for the manner in which they expand reality.

Yet what, indeed, is the reality that a novelist has to represent? As an answer I shall place only two quotations here, two opposites. The first derives from Joan Rockwell's *Fact in Fiction*: "The main domain of the novel is the period of human activity that we devote to our existence... whatever it is, the plot is, in essence, a story of attraction-following-success and along with this that of the upwardly directed movement, whether it be symbolic or real."⁶⁷ Joan Rockwell's stereotype is aptly drawn, but *Prae* would certainly hang loosely on it. For that, too, one needs to abstract at random in order to bring the later *St. Orpheus Breviary* series into however remote connection to the scheme. There the recurrent philosophy of money, historical machinations, sycophancies, and assassinations place the trinity of individual success, grubbing for money, and social mobility, bourgeois society's ideal system of norms, into a wider context. Kingsley Amis sharply observes: "I have no novelists [on my bookshelves]" who serve this system of norms, "finding theirs a puny and piffling art, one that, even at its best, can render truthfully no more than a few minor parts of the total world it pretends to take as its field of reference."⁶⁸

To talk about the total world — an unattainable, unrealizable task, especially if one understands by the notion of the world not merely the visible, sensible, sensorily perceptible, but that is not all Szentkuthy understands by it. In this connection the second of the quotations is pertinent, being a way of looking at the existence of time as formulated by Milán Füst (1888–1967), a Hungarian writer who grew up on much the same reading matter as Szentkuthy: "Non-being is merely the reverse side of being; it does not come *after* it but simultaneously with it. Just as being is only one form of nonexistence."⁶⁹

The all-seeing, omniscient, all-sensing, all-touching, and all-dreaming author of *Prae* strives *inter alia* to grasp this problem of philosophical infra- and ultra-being, incidentally, as it were, making an attempt to create a logical and lyrical catalog of every possible human experience. That is a plan endeavoring at totality, at righting every phenomenon of unrestrained nature on the basis of a logical program then

⁶⁷ Joan Rockwell, *Fact in Fiction: The Use of Literature in the Systematic Study of Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).

⁶⁸ Kingsley Amis, *The Green Man* (London: Jonathan Cape; New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1969) 85–86.

⁶⁹ Cited by György Somlyó, *Philoktétész sebe* [The Wound of Philoctetes] (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1980) 350.

drawing from it an even more logical and all-embracing realization, to stitch them together, to untangle lines of force that intertwine things. Miklós Béládi writes:

... starting out simultaneously from the side of experience, spectacle, and philosophy, abstract thinking, he sought to completely transform the world of the novel ... not by giving it an unconditionally positive program; on the contrary, the program ... set uncertainty and doubt in place of certainty: doubting everything and wanting to know everything.⁷⁰

It is a technique of association that has gone wild; the ‘millions’ of associations that are tied to a thing often seem to be wild and illegitimate, though each one of them, in point of fact, a variation, often serving not to enrich the main subject but to annihilate one another.⁷¹ Of course, the novel does not blunder at the time an association is being made known, but gallops onward through the most glittering similes and gloriously tailored metaphors in a magical, lushly sprouting forest of precision.⁷² Out of life’s jungle there will eventually emerge an English landscape garden, out of confusion, order, out of chaotic impressionism, a triumph of logic with the assistance of catalysts and filters of the work’s main protagonists, of the rationalism of the Frenchman Leville-Touqué and the humor of the Englishman Halbert. “Several souls,” Pál Nagy observed, “reside in Szentkuthy: a deep and a frivolous one; a romantic and a rationalist; a precise, Germanic type (represented by Halbert in *Prae*)⁷³ and a facile, Latinate type (represented by Leville-Touqué in *Prae*); his spirit is sometimes Germanic, sometimes French, sometimes English...”⁷⁴ In fact, *Prae* makes no distinction between German, French, and English mentalities. *Prae* does bring them on, it is true, but all three of them by themselves at one and the same time.

⁷⁰ Miklós Béládi, *op. cit.* p. 216.

⁷¹ Cf. Miklós Szentkuthy, *Cynthia* (*Szent Orpheus Breviárium*. II. kötet) [5. Cynthia in Vol. 2 of *St Orpheus's Breviary*] (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1973) 86.

⁷² On that, Antal Szerb wrote the following: “... one would still have to accord his similes an eminent place in Hungarian literature. Similes as audacious, startling, and apposite, and in such quantity, are not to be found anywhere else. Daring. If one were to make a quantitative measure of the value of the similes individually, that is, measure the distance that exists in the ordinary consciousness between two concepts that are linked by just a single one of Szentkuthy’s metaphors, then he would undoubtedly hold the world record.” See Antal Szerb, “Szentkuthy Miklós: *Prae*,” originally published in the journal *Erdélyi Helikon*, No. 7 (1934) 547–49, and reprinted in *A mítosz mítosza: In memoriam Szentkuthy Miklós*, ed. Gyula Rugási (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2001), pp. 20–23. An English translation is available online in *Hyperion*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (July 2013) 93–96.

⁷³ Nagy is in error here, in my view; Halbert is much more an individual who grows out of the English baroque than the bringing to life of any Germanic mythological cliché.

⁷⁴ Pál Nagy, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

***Prae's* Protagonists**

The true main protagonist of *Prae*, incidentally, is Leatrice, or in other words, *the one and only metaphor* toward the detection of which *Prae* is headed. Or, as Imre Bata convincingly propounded, an = sign can be placed between *Prae* and Leatrice:

Leatrice herself is present in the novel as an existing person, and it is sure that the entirety of this contrived but imperceptibly, ethereally floating epic creation is identical to that feminine phenomenon of which we originally knew only the name and that something is up with her... We can be witnesses of a process of genesis, an astronomical system, or a culture arising, but we are not wrong in calling this whole process, this dynamic state, Leatrice. The broadest and most concrete (narrowest) of all metaphors is not that famous sunflower, but the word Leatrice... Having elucidated the relationships of metaphor – topic – composition, he recognized his expressive goal, its ontically based philosophical approximation, but he continually kept stumbling into the same problem. However, he avoided the subject, and that subject was necessarily life itself, he incessantly ran against the phenomenon of the woman. Because we can learn much wisdom from Leville-Touqué and Halbert, from the technique of construction itself, and from Peter, Lea's uncle, an elderly gent of the old school, but somewhere ... it becomes obvious to us that in this *Prae* everything is for Lea, for Leatrice. Even the women are for her. And we acquiesce in this because we ourselves realize that Lea is the most responsive of all of them, the most mobile, she accepts everything, from her all waves rebound, she is the new anthropologic medium in whom the sense of duality can be manifested. In comparison to her, Touqué is doctrinaire and Halbert eclectic. She is the only character whom they do not create because she is created. On reflection, even the meditations of Halbert's father presuppose her. It is the same with the essayistic inserts. To begin with they fall into *Prae's* channel out of male brains, but as they approach Leatrice, they shine through her skin, excite her senses, set her nervous system aquiver, and finally she, Lea, becomes the expression of ethereal intellect... All that, however, does not mean that Leatrice becomes in any way palpable and describable.⁷⁵

According to an early review by Béla Hamvas,

The novel's highpoint is the figure of Leville-Touqué. If one looks for relatives in world literature, then maybe Sterne's aging Shandy or old Karamazov is closest. A person in the flesh makes a direct impression: he is distinctively new and yet always the same. He dares to change strikingly without changing. He is bizarre, ingenious, crankish even, but he always remains the same person. Is this Leville-Touqué chap entertaining? Most certainly, and to the nth degree at that. But that is not enough. Because he does not entertain in the way that Abbé Coignard does, but in the way that a great actor entertains. If he is on the scene, then

⁷⁵ Imre Bata, *op. cit.*

everybody laughs. Touqué is a bit crazy, but he is exceedingly smart. There is always a touch of the ironic in what he says (being the editor of the journal *Antipsyche*), but he is still serious. The whole person looks like a farce, and there is something of the intellectual clown about him, yet he struggles captivatingly for what is ‘simpler than thought and better than instinct.’ He is given to exaggeration, extravagant, eccentric, and at the same time the opposite of all these. In a certain respect it is Leville-Touqué who makes the novel; Szentkuthy merely writes it down. In the novel he is the higher mythological being, the real creator, and Szentkuthy is the chosen instrument through whom the myth of Leville-Touqué becomes manifest.⁷⁶

Miklós Béládi, by contrast, felt that the only hero of *Prae* was thinking itself, association: “The grammatically totally logical text moves from page to page enlarging and prizing apart semantic connections. In point of fact, *Prae* is nothing other than a huge stream of associations of ideas in which several impersonal characters serve merely as pretexts for this outpouring of intellectual lava.”⁷⁷

Szentkuthy’s literary vein is fed then by two hearts. One of them is that of Hieronymus Bosch, the other that of Voltaire.

The ‘Human’ *Prae*

The poetics of *Prae* is an apology for accidentalism, a praise of chance one-offness — that is why in Dezső Tandori’s reading *unbegunness* is a synonym of *let them be afraid*. In his opinion,

Prae neither offers material for cultural histories, nor is it possible to trace back from it to those sorts of things. If one wishes, this work is an ultimate authorial whimsy, a set of operations that cannot be carried out. True, it gives no support to doubts either: it is hard to read it in any other way than in a spirit of granting ultimate credit, and what ‘compensates’ us, the thing from which nevertheless an extreme amount of gain accrues is: the infinity of connections, the unfathomable extent of motifs, the extraordinariness of long-sustained, repeated, vibrated ‘voices,’ and coupled with that, a torrent of new beginnings which do not even mime the appearance of recommencements, which is then a fastening on again, a slipping over, and along with that a waving of an entirely novel process of logic, and the fact that it sweeps along just because, essentially, it does not matter, because the writer lends objects their interest or form or he achieves that with glittering exaggerations.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Béla Hamvas, “Szentkuthy Miklós: *Prae*.” Originally published in the journal *Napkelet*, No. 2 (1935); reprinted in *A mítosz mítosza. In memoriam Szentkuthy Miklós*, ed. Gyula Rugási (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2001) 32–35.

⁷⁷ Miklós Béládi, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

⁷⁸ Dezső Tandori, “Szentkuthy-tanulmányozás” [Studying Sz], *Mozgó Világ*, No. 6 (1985) 108.

The novel unequivocally rejects plot-centricity, though within the text are scattered short stories, plans for novellas, and, first and foremost, detailed descriptions, miniatures resembling painted compositions that decorate the texts of codices. These jewels are often ekphrases of paintings or analyses and textual interpretations of musical works, improvisations of the viewer's or listener's background experience, which run to several pages. In this monumental work of Szentkuthy's early life we encounter a genre that he was to favor later on: the commentary, especially in the cases of scientific reading matter, which leads straight to wordplay, especially in the full-blooded parodies of the artificial use of language by German writers such as can be found, for example, in the titles given to essays by Leville-Touqué. Besides, the work is teeming with English, German, Latin, and French phrases and whole sentences that the author wittily renders in Hungarian, usually interweaving a lot more into the translation than the original text contains — indeed, sometimes taking the interpretation in a completely different direction. These linguistic games and linguistic mimicry, an appropriate narrative of the register of a given piece of reading, oddly enough do not disperse the text into eclecticism but are organically built into the methodically constructed private mythology that Szentkuthy has so methodically built an emphatic element of which is the confession, which in *Prae* is definitive in the 'Meditations' of Halbert's father.

In 1934, and for a long time afterwards, Szentkuthy's novel created a vacuum around itself; it had no precedent or continuation. It had created the possibility of a new direction for the Hungarian novel, but in so doing it also created a dead end as it had attempted the impossible: it discarded the solid outlines of characters (i.e., it laid down one of the basic principles of modern prose, according to which in most cases a person is not determined by what he or she does every day but by an action taken only once), a fixed location and the succession of a chronological process, smuggling in *accidentalism* and *synchrony* in their place. His goal was to grasp the *prae* state, when everything present now was *prae*; the intertwining of simultaneity and anteriority in an original state that precedes everything, the state of a "dream reborn." Chronology has disappeared from the novel, its place being taken by an inner time. The technical realization of the description of a contrast-free inner time is the process of consciousness, the description of a stream of consciousness that is none other than association. The time of association is duration, *durée*, which has at its disposal the category of neither the past nor the present.

Prae's narrative-shredding experiment rejects the prevailing attraction to narrative, time monism, replacing its monotony with its fiction of time's multidimensionality. By the notion of multidimensionality one should imagine a textual relation in which the temporal amoebas stand in spatial relationship to each other, and therefore the quasi-categories in the *durée* can take place arbitrarily (in accordance to structural principles) alongside one another. In other words, the

various events do not end up next to each other in accordance with the technique of memory (to repeat: *not* time monism) but with total temporal freedom as pure elements of space and consciousness placed with the most capricious motions of architectural composition: "Instead of time monism a schizophrenic aquarium: the individual narrative details swim to and fro in a free water of space instead of a paralyzing trough of time, like distracted fishes which constantly change their relationship to one another."⁷⁹ Or in the diary: "*time* is just an *abstract narrative* that is not the essence of the time of subjective life which accompanies life and thus is *not* time but a 'chronoid sphere.'"⁸⁰ As I have indicated more than once, the author of *Prae* rejects every 'monism,' opening up in its place a space for the inexhaustibly flowing, endless process of thinking wherein the kaleidoscope of life sparkles with unrivalled traditional descriptions, original similes, and astonishing metaphors, poetic images which soar beyond reality, associations of ideas somersaulting from one topic to another.

Association makes possible without any preparation the connection of 'baroque epilepsy' and 'the self-enclosedness of an Egyptian mummy' that the author wished for and aimed at as a creative process (notwithstanding that Szentkuthy can catch the reader unprepared even after he has made all due preparations). *Prae* does not act on the emotions but on reason, and it thereby creates its own picture of reality: if the work is not a conventional mirror of reality, reason tries to hold together the centrifugal forces and build up a picture of reality of extremely abstract self-expression.

The polyphonic splendor of associations can attribute their polysemy, their wealth, their autonomous function, and their artistic change in meaning to the tension between the inducing object (three totally independent starting points) and the induced association (linking of said starting points). The tension generated by a dialectical opposition is always capable of providing an association with a new charge, of increasing the polyphony of a representation.

Prae therefore exchanged the concept of a unidirectional, pure continuity of time for a complex, multidirectional motion of mutually interchangeable time elements having opposite signs, thereby exposing the polyrhythmic nature of the continuity of temporality.

Time in *Prae* essentially coincides with the time of writing, of constructing the text, because that is the one and only possibility within the principle of continuity of literature's time-space category.

⁷⁹ *Prae*, Vol. 1 (2014) 407.

⁸⁰ *Fájdalmak és titkok játéka*, *op. cit.*, p. 103 (entry for 2 June 1932).

Stream of Consciousness

A description of stream of consciousness cannot concern itself with a single point as a way of looking at things; there is no favored perspective from which the author regards the world, but it is achieved precisely with a technique: the doubting consciousness inspects the object of his or her investigation placed in continually newer aspects. Moreover, it also presents it from an unusual angle. A close reading naturally has to build on an organic compositional framework. With *Prae*, this is mathematical abstraction. A mental colossus seldom reveals its skeleton to lay people, let alone its capillary network. "However great the tendency to completeness, the movement of Leatrice's personality in itself is not enough," Imre Bata writes, "because there is no genuine counterpole in the process of her existence. The true masculine counterpole of the feminine quality is XIV, the last chapter of *Prae*, *Meditations of Halbert's Father, an Anglican Clergyman of Exeter*. The preceding chapters are metaphors for Leatrice, Leatrice topics, and Leatrice landscapes, and the reason that one-sidedness does not tip the asymmetric construction out of balance is thanks to the provision of more Non-*Prae* diagonals. The relation of *Prae* and anti-*Prae* hold in temporary balance something that is consolidated in the meditations of an Anglican clergyman. The meditations, on the other hand, are based on the optimal reality of the past, and that reality optimum is English liberalism, Anglican pain, "this illogical, half-ready compromise illness." The 'English rheumatism' is precisely the degree of physical pain that corresponds best to the person: if the clergyman felt more pain that might make him a Catholic, he would yield to the passionate temptation of martyrdom."⁸¹

In examining Szentkuthy's *Prae* it would be useless to try filleting the novel with statistical methods, structuralist tricks, or deconstruction. By Szentkuthy's intention it works like an enormous melting-pot: "I want to do everything," the author records in his diary while he is writing *Prae*: "religion, god, people, opinions. It will be my Work, a special world, the world of a sensible person: in detail, accurately, with history, art, world view, etc."⁸² Nevertheless, one senses that the composition in the work is not so much dormant as cyclically recurrent, pulsating. From the point of view of the composition it is immaterial that two-thirds of the way through the book Szentkuthy throws out all the variations of topics and elaboration, figures and location, putting any further cogitations into the mouth of an elderly Protestant clergyman. In order to gain an understanding of the composition, one needs to call on the assistance of the author, which is to say the text:

⁸¹ Imre Bata, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁸² *Fájdalmak és titkok játéka*, *op. cit.* (entry for 26 December 1930) 84.

If, then, I truly wish to draw a lifelike portrait of the sweetheart I had come to loathe, then, first of all, I must draw a quite insignificant thing, a poor sketch of a sunflower, i.e., the 'absolute detail'; secondly, every imaginable thing in the world: ships, bridges, historical eras, and statistics about the distribution by occupation of those who will rise again at the last judgment: or in other words, 'absolutely everything.' These two are bound together by the second degree with colorless-odorless-insubstantial and transparent threads: the 'theme' produced. The third degree is linked together by no more than my intellectual will ...⁸³

The composition of *Prae* has to be perceived as a cyclical structure (with some major reservations) where the absolute detail and absolute everything is held together by the one or more (*n*) topics that comprise one phase of a cycle. That phase is subsequently repeated *n* times, with the forces which sustain the repetitions being constrained into a continuous cycle only by the author's intellectual will (i.e., his inclination to carry on drafting). The phases of a cycle are not separated by the customary methods of a traditional prose narrative. The poetic stream of thought of the writer's demand for ceaseless intensity, the vitality of his 'primal élan,' the neurotic demand for 'charity and eroticism,' sweeps away trumped-up impediments with their odor of paper so that one is incapable of perceiving the structure visually or can only get an inkling of it.⁸⁴ For Szentkuthy what he meant as artistic form was the pure or fictive plasticity of a representation: "I am infinitely *descriptive* by nature — I am incapable of utilizing forms of sentences (questions, exclamations) in a poem: I feel that is constructive, fictive, a lie."⁸⁵ Incidentally, the especially exciting closing chord of *Prae*, the meditations of the vicar of Exeter, in the final 280 or so pages of the book about charity, sin, God, ontology, and love, the root of those ruminations is to be found in *Baroque Robert*, and they run like threads, mushrooming through the author's *oeuvre*.

Commentary and Self-Commentary

To date one could encounter English translations of Szentkuthy's works somewhat out of order, for the first volume of the *St. Orpheus Breviary, Marginalia on Casanova* (1939 in Hungarian, 2012 in English), and *Towards the One and Only Metaphor* (1935 in Hungarian, 2013 in English) originally appeared in Hungary after *Prae* (1934 in Hungary). Although with this author it is easy to surmise that the texts were conceived synchronously, yet *Metaphor* was published directly after *Prae*, as was *Fejezet a szerelemről* [Chapter On Love] (1936 in Hungary), and that succession raises the question of a creative dynamic being manifested in the diverging synchronicity

⁸³ *Prae*, Vol. 1 (2014) 26.

⁸⁴ Although in Antal Szerb's view, reading *Prae* is "...as if one were strolling about in an enormous blueprint-turned-space" (Antal Szerb "Szentkuthy Miklós: *Prae*," *op. cit.*, p. 21).

⁸⁵ *Towards the One and Only Metaphor* (2013) §100.

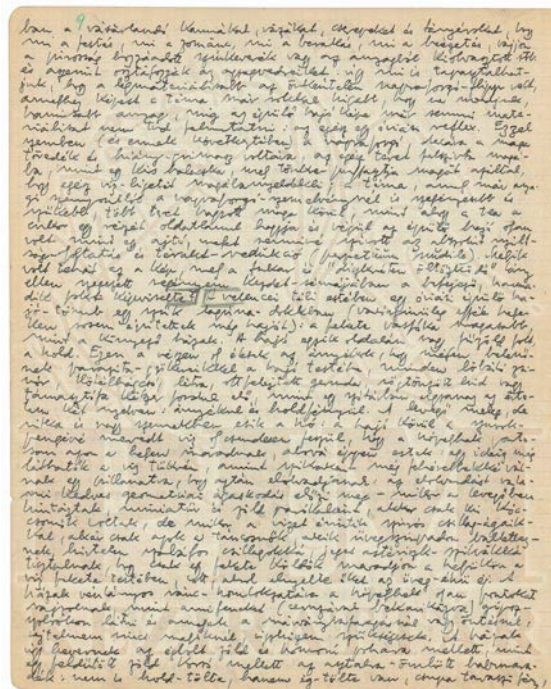
and, over and beyond that, to the multiple underpinnings of Szentkuthy's creative choices.

A different reading of *Prae*, as against its first edition is offered by its second edition (1980), in which the author demystified the text, dividing it into shorter units, clearing it up typographically, placing 'road signs' in it, and adding a table of contents — all of those functioning as a kind of travel guide within the text. It was Szentkuthy himself who imposed the page setting into chapters, though in the end it was Mária Tompa who bore the burden of that work, and the resulting proportioning changed the text's reception a great deal. Pál Nagy considers the intervention to be nothing short of criminal.⁸⁶ As I see it, the work gained from having a detailed index of contents and being broken into shorter sections. The texture block, which Mihály Babits had called "a mountain of mush," lost its quality of a medieval codex. (Let me also add that Szentkuthy, while remaining a fan of the simple and elegant front cover with its overhang, which extended far beyond the block of the contents pages,⁸⁷ came to grow fonder of the page-setting of the second edition and even declared that he could imagine a third edition also in that page-setting.)⁸⁸ When Tompa diligently set to work on breaking the text up, Szentkuthy time and again demanded that ever more paragraphs be made on the pages.

⁸⁶ "One pictures to oneself Szentkuthy keeping to himself any disparaging, even threatening comments, as he reads the vitriolic criticisms of *Prae*. One imagines his psychological state when he woke up to the fact that even those who were reckoned to be the most highly cultivated of his friends, a Gábor Halász or an Antal Szerb, did not entirely understand his intentions and did not truly appreciate what he had achieved. The Magyar syndrome came into play which in the case of an avant-garde writer like Lajos Kassák led him to rewrite one of the finest poetic images in Hungarian (or even world) literature, tamed him, because everyone, including first and foremost József Attila, alleged that the free-verse line of 'The flower has tusks, the green goat's beard of the clouds' in one of his 70 numbered poems of early 1927 was a mixed metaphor and Kassák's poems were 'incomprehensible... illustrations of a most thoughtless and most absurd esthetic.' So it was that in later editions the his 35 verse [(Budapest: Munka Folyóirat)] had its first line changed into the banality of the 70th of his numbered prose poems of 193: 'The flowers have a shadow, the clouds a gilded crown' ... Thus it can happen that in the second edition of *Prae* Szentkuthy — recalling the criticism of Mihály Babits — cut up the unparagraphed pages of the original (1934) edition, breaking up its splendid blocks into chapters with inserted subtitles." Pál Nagy, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁸⁷ The mega-interview which makes up the volume *Frivolitások és bitvallások* [Frivolities & Confessions (1988)] speaks in Ch. 11, on p. 328, about how, in 1933, he saw in a bookseller's shop window the title page of a journal called PAN which was an absolute inspiration for the marvelous cover of the first edition of *Prae*.

⁸⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, Ch. 12, pp. 345–346.



Manuscript page from *Prae*

One finds on the pages of *Prae* excellent material to illustrate Szentkuthy's views on esthetics and language. Although the *Breviary* and the other novels reflect those views more cogently, albeit indirectly, his standpoint in *Prae* is direct.

The first striking fact in regard to esthetic representation is that the author avows the principles of *Neue Sachlichkeit*; for one thing, he aims at an exaggerated objectivity, precision, and photographic description, for another, the much talked-of anti-world and anti-thing are never far from him. This means that what is beside conspicuously exaggerated objectivity (hyperrealism) is the lifelessness and lack of lifelikeness of the non-object (magic realism):

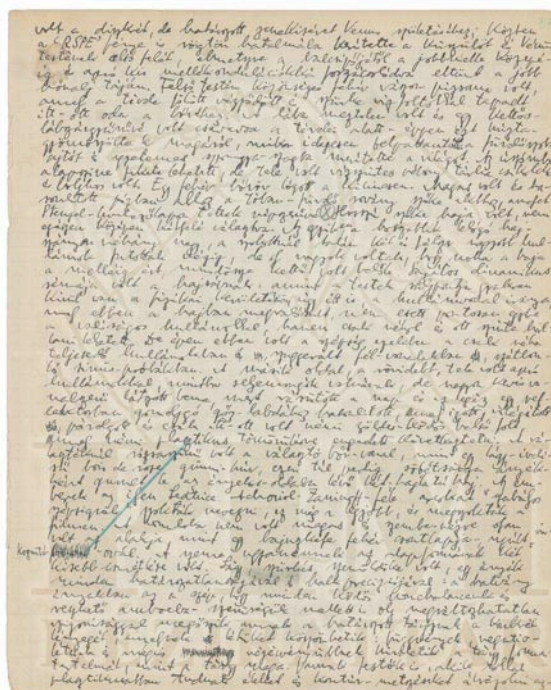
what is artistic in an artistically depicted tree is that, for one thing, it is depicted as even more tree-like than it is; in other words, it emphasizes its identity to the point where it is stimulated into an essence; and for another thing, the tree will express something that, in principle, is non-tree, indeed anti-tree and never-tree, as if it was seeking to convey the most treeless world possible...

Prae's tremendous dynamism, its all-consuming functioning, the progressive utopia of its ontology is, as Imre Bata puts it, the drama of cognition:

The cognition relates to what is non-human, in other words, a cognizer: people in general. In that way *Prae's* human relations are not social relationships because the relations themselves function from the viewpoint of cognition. That is why we had to say that, as a matter of fact, *Prae* is a novel of the novel, because the

novel, too, functions as a cognizer... The action of a cognizer: a person who is researching: the grabbing of being as being from nothing is spontaneous, the writer's goal is precisely that this guaranteed, spontaneous activity should not be disturbed even by what might unsettle it.⁸⁹

Prae's continually skeptical, searching, and ruminating pages did not definitively put a full stop to deciding what one may call realist portrayal. At least that is what is suggested by the author's ever-renewed searches for an answer in, for example, *The Almanac of Humility*: "The rococo woman's dress: stylized eroticism; a swimsuited 20th-century woman: scientific eroticism. This is where it turns out that it is completely undecidable: does 'stylization' or 'scientific *Sachlichkeit*' express reality more realistically?"⁹⁰



Another manuscript page from *Prae*

The other basic esthetic principle that can be detected in the text is the exploitation of the unused, unexplored esthetics hidden or inherent in the material. The writer only lines up next to each other the textures of topics and ideas without any *apparent* need as, after all, in his view, the bud of esthetic action is inherent in the material itself; moreover, the material, the natural material, can be provided with the same qualities as a work of art that has come into being as a result of the creator's shaping. This idealizing equalization of natural beauty and artistic beauty

⁸⁹ Imre Bata, p. cit.

⁹⁰ *Az alázat kalendáriuma*, op. cit., 257.

seems to be an introduction to structuralism — it shifts part of the burdens and duties of the writer onto readers, i.e., it leaves a more significant space for individual interpretation. One needs to make inquiries in that direction with reservations. Even though Szentkuthy at a number of points shrewdly puts his finger on the basic principles of structuralism, he nevertheless reflects the doctrine of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the avant-garde of the time:

Estheticians of old emphasized that raw green pigment which is squeezed from a tube of paint does not as yet rouse an esthetic effect because it is an ordinary stimulus; beauty starts where the matter of 'crude' stimuli is transformed in the picture into clover, acacias, and lilac bushes. Nowadays, however, even the green pigments squeezed out of a tube are not felt to be servants under stimuli which have no independent esthetic value but things that we enjoy as material (as *Sache*) which can bring new artistic surprises even before a painter uses them for some purpose.⁹¹

Szentkuthy has a mathematical formula for beauty, as for everything else, up Leville's sleeve:

Beauty is as if it were a formula expressing infinite interchangeability: *questio curiosa ex doctrina combustionis*,⁹² to bring out again my favorite subject, the letters of Bernouilli.⁹³ He asked how it was possible to exhaustively exchange, taking every case into consideration, an infinite number of letters to which an infinite number of envelopes belong, in such a way that each letter is placed in a non-corresponding envelope. For there was found to be a formula that explains the totality of ways in which they can be exchanged. Beauty relates to the world in the same way as the algebraic formula found for the letters and their envelopes.⁹⁴

In that manner Szentkuthy modified a thesis advanced by Milán Füst, according to which, for an artist, everything that exists is there for art in such a way that everything existing is art *per se*. Our writer of the extremes in his linguistic denial-language creating mode: "Tilly carried on the conversation, switching grammar over and over again with her pearls like Henry III his beard, inserting even her shoes between syllables, substituting punctuation marks with items of clothing, so that Touqué created for himself and impossible new language and linguistic science..."⁹⁵

The novel did not, however, offer a new possibility for that kind of multimedia art, a representation of body language and gestural grammar so that the quotation

⁹¹ *Prae II, op. cit.*, p. 538.

⁹² A curious problem of the doctrine of phlogiston (combustion).

⁹³ The reference is to Swiss mathematician Jacob Bernouilli (1655 [O.S. 1654]–1705), who was one of the founders of the calculus of variations (i.e., permutations).

⁹⁴ *Prae II, op. cit.*, p. 440–441.

⁹⁵ *Prae II, op. cit.*, p. 293.

serves rather to indicate the author's sensitivity in feeling that syntax could not by itself do justice to complete self-expression. He himself felt the Hungarian literary language to be inadequate, and it was for that reason that he interwove his associative (internal) and rhetorical (external) monologues with the jargon of Budapest's streets. He also cultivated a system of the roughest and most profane metaphors, but the most typical is his use of physiological, artistic, architectural, microbiological, and theological jargon, which often results in texts reminiscent of the incomprehensibility of encyclopedias. Into this forest of specialized terms, however, he occasionally smuggles in analogies and the descriptive style of the basest literary and mundane communications, which he rejects precisely by criticizing them:

The room was in pearl-gray shade, & through the glass of the window, the iron rods of the balcony grill looked like blue flower stems in the fog, the curtain quietly rocking like a hung-out net in which the sea had got caught up as prey, like an indigo-leafed poster lotus, and hills, skew palms in a jumble on the slopes like hairpins pinned in disarray and ready to drop out at any moment. Clouds were dangling from the branches of the sky like laburnum in the spring from bald twigs.⁹⁶

Szentkuthy's much-debated use of a macaronic mix of languages, which over the decades has been a source of much vexation for critics and diversion for readers, can also be illustrated.⁹⁷ The "sewage-water which also carries along treasures," or "Definitions in the direction of a deliberate relyricization of the language of epics is not going to bring us any closer to the linguistic formations that have to be examined."⁹⁸

One needs to be aware that the protagonists of *Prae* do not use everyday dialogue when they start speaking. Irrespective of place, time, companion, and speech situation, they speak in hyperboles and trapezoids and a pseudo-mathematical hieroglyphic language as if reciting an apologia to an essay. The

⁹⁶ *Prae*, Vol. 1 (2014) 196.

⁹⁷ In the 2nd issue of the journal *Nyugat* ('West'), for 1934 Gábor Halász wrote the following: "Along with the slain plot and executed characters, there is no mercy for sound and style either. Here too absolute vagary has to prevail, in a macaronic language which would be a strange meld of scientific jargon, newspaper language and pure literariness, exquisite similes presenting in poetry, sound pictures reproducing initial impressions with barbaric freshness and crude generalizations. A 'curiosity' made of words (the burlesque aim again), an unbridled, chaotic torrent, an irregular channel; sewage-water which also carries along treasures (reprinted in *A mítosz mítosza. In memoriam Szentkuthy Miklós*, ed. Gyula Rugási. Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2001, p. 25)."

⁹⁸ In a review by Béla Hamvas that was originally published in the journal *Napkelet*, 1935, No. 2: "Szentkuthy is the one who has taken it furthest in the Hungarian language, further than the expressionists. That is also one of the most immediately impressive advantages of this novel: a sense of a kind of freedom, a liberation from platitudes, fresh linguistic air" (reprinted in *A mítosz mítosza. In memoriam Szentkuthy Miklós*, ed. Gyula Rugási. Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2001, p. 34).

mathematical style in *Prae* did not arise as a pose but was born of genuine interest, or as Szentkuthy affirms in his diary: “Couples = ultra well-proportioned sentence + diffuse structure (Flaubert), or: baroque-adventurous diffuse sentence. But that demands a mathematically balanced structuring of plot.

The composition: incandescent tedium,
tense monotony,
delirious indifference.

That is good, that is fine.”⁹⁹

It is no wonder, then, that words get distorted in this ‘logo-jargon,’ and the luxuriating superstructure of epithets determines the structure. Szentkuthy is a true artist of language, his compounding of words, linking of metaphors, and other linguistic-rhetorical formations are carefully planned, semantically loaded configurations. As opposed to the unending and insane kaleidoscope of reality, language and thought are meager, so that the linguistic material which is at our disposal has to be applied as thoughtfully as possible: “all that exists for one is language, only grammar, which is moreover highly precise...”

Szentkuthy derived pleasure most of all from descriptions, from dazzling portrayal. He adapts easily and skillfully to place, time, and figure, so his descriptions turn into characterizations, plastically displaying the era or person who is being described. Thus, the detail in *A megszabadított Jeruzsálem* [Jerusalem Liberated] (1965) where the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II takes a lesson in anatomy suggests equally the predominant atmosphere of mysticism and magic in the place, the extent of the period knowledge of natural history with all its naivety, naturalism, and wild romanticism:

Look at the body desecrated worse than in any defloration by the knives of the anatomists, one breast still having an intact pink wild rose at its tip for all that it is being tickled by the hoary or black beards of the senile Talmudists and young Muslims leaning over it — the skin having been peeled down from the other like the first fine page of a parchment codex, pallid glands and blue, yellow and red blood vessels running and twisting all over the place like earthworms.¹⁰⁰

Whether the essence of things is real or imagined cannot always be grasped due to the insertion of conventional or profane similes: “The lake, which is a mirror, dark green, mute, shiny, heavy, marshy, autumnal and millennial (above all it casts these attributes from itself like dead fish).”¹⁰¹ In order not to get into explaining or

⁹⁹ *Fájdalmak és titkok játéka*, *op. cit.*, p. 128 (entry for May 1939).

¹⁰⁰ Miklós Szentkuthy, *A megszabadított Jeruzsálem* [Jerusalem Liberated] (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1965) 265.

¹⁰¹ *Towards the One and Only Metaphor* (2013).

interpreting one simile by using another, a metaphor is needed (one need only think here of only one of the metaphors in *Prae*, of the attempt aimed at a metaphor for Leatrice). The essence of Szentkuthy's metaphors lies in their concentration of all the possible associations of ideas. That is how a gilded mirror frame becomes a metaphor for splendor and peace, a boudoir and Byzantium, a trysting place, a great grandmother in 1820, and all baroque arrogance, or out of Halley's comet — "the celestial breach of contract of Halley's stars." Another characteristic of metaphoric speech is the appropriate (only possible) metaphor is used at the appropriate place. For example, when he writes about empresses of China he notes that with him reason has a snow duck's belly; in talking about Sleeping Beauty, on the other hand, he makes adept use of a complicated metaphor which links cause and effect by mentioning Sleeping Beauty's needle-tranquil body.

Beauty, beauty — erotic beauty, flower-garden beauty, musical beauty... What are you? What can you be? Up till now every decision of yours was a gorilla's bark, a bandying of words, the atrocious ignorance of non-artistic water bladders for heads. Beauty, sex, God... beauty, is still the best thing in the word (next to love) — right? 'Reason' is blind drunk; 'Morality': a chameleon, opal, rainbow, anything and everything that you want or don't want. 'Beauty,' on the other hand, is *certain* (nothing else is), and like a bridge it arches over our nerves: from the deepest biological and physiological depths (unknowns) towards the highest, inordinately craved, inordinately yearned-for, divine, metaphysical Absolute (unknown) — it arches between sensuality and Intellectuality, picks and mixes a bit out of this, a bit of That — ¹⁰²

This quotation hints at the nature of beauty (esthetic quality) but does not define it, nor can it, since, after all, some of the greatest intellects over the millennia have been incapable of coming up with a definition. The category to which beauty belongs is a perennial problem of esthetics, and on looking over the ideas and definitions up till now Szentkuthy was most impressed by the subjective formulations of the idealists: the world is beautiful, and *basta!*

I have already made reference to the philosophers who had the greatest influence on *Prae*. As an extension of that, let me mention a few more thinkers whose ideals of beauty chime with the notion propounded in *Prae*.

First, I would include a category which has been around since the time of Democritus: *kalokagathia*, which in point of fact derives from Ancient Greek καλός (*kalós*, 'beautiful'), και ('and') *agathós* ('good') — a blending of the esthetic and morality (everlasting topics with our writer). One should be put off by the fact that for the Greeks *kalokagathia* most likely meant that the beautiful was what was good,

¹⁰² Miklós Szentkuthy, *Kanonizált kétségbeesés (Szent Orpheus breviáriuma III. kötet)* [St. Orpheus Breviary 6: Confession and Puppet] (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1974) 52.

what was ethical. That does not apply to Szentkuthy, or at least it does not apply in that form, though with him, too, the two notions are closely linked.

Next, reference should be made to St. Augustine. In his view every existing thing was beautiful, and that idea is consonant with Szentkuthy's attitude.¹⁰³ According to St. Augustine's reasoning, all things are beautiful because God created them, and as God cannot create anything ugly (on account of divine mercy), nothing ugly exists either. St. Augustine's esthetics avoids the counterpole of beauty, but in *Prae* Szentkuthy expounds his theory of multipolarity, and in his later works he frequently adverts to ugly people and ugly actions. Or are the people and actions rather immoral or perhaps *kalokagathia*, as with St. Augustine?

The theory of beauty by association comes from 18th-century England. It states that beauty is a phenomenon that stirs up pleasant associations, or evokes in one associations that are rich in sentiments and notions. Is a finer theory needed as an underpinning for a writer who was able to improvise a novel-length associative conjuring trick, starting off from light beams refracted at an odd angle from the window of a neighboring house? and whose very life was association?

In the year when *Prae* was published Antal Szerb made a remark of great importance: "It will become one of the great documents of Hungarian culture that this book was written in Hungarian."¹⁰⁴ Sadly, that very same fact has been the reason for its 80 years of latency. For eight decades Hungarian literary historians considered that the book would never be translated in its entirety into any other language. They were wrong. Thanks to the efforts of Rainer J. Hanshe and the determination of his Contra Mundum Press, as well as Tim Wilkinson's perseverance in translating, the first of the two volumes of Miklós Szentkuthy's work now comes before an English reading public and may cast a new light on the past and on the assessment of Hungarian and perhaps also European literature.

¹⁰³ "What is beauty for me?" he poses the question very precisely in *The Almanac of Humility* and also gives a precise answer: "1) *sachlich* [i.e., objective] microscope pictures of flowers, parts of the face; 2) expressionist compositions which treat a topic solely as a minimal starting-point, the abstract, absolutely vital ornamentation of lines, colors, and figures in relation to the topic and the painter's biological constitution" (*Az alázat kalendáriuma*, *op. cit.*, p. 60).

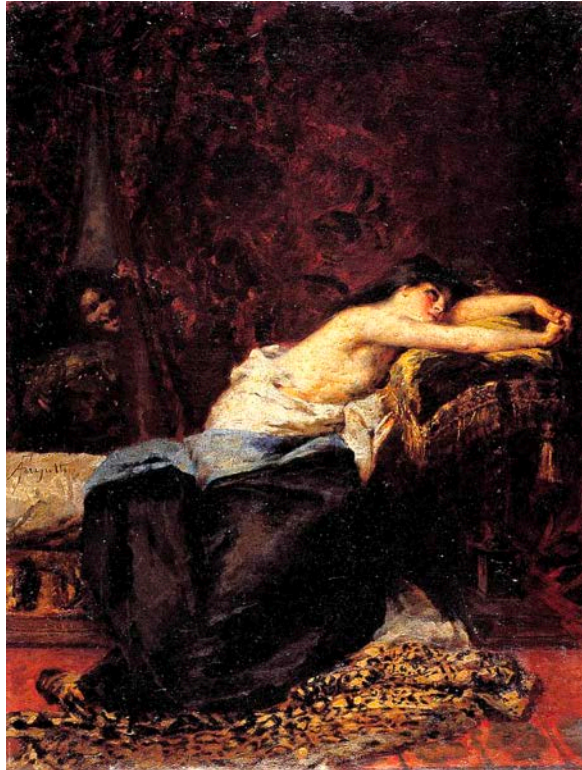
¹⁰⁴ Antal Szerb, "Szentkuthy Miklós: *Prae*," *Erdélyi Helikon*, No. 7 (1934) 547–49, and reprinted in *A mítosz mítosza: In memoriam Szentkuthy Miklós*, ed. Gyula Rugási (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2001) 20–23.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

MIKLOS SZENKUTHY

CHAPTER ON LOVE (excerpt)



Adolfo Feragutti Visconti, *Jus primae noctis* (1888)

Translated by Erika Mihálycsa

20.

He shut the door behind himself and went up the stairs. After getting a view of the company of mourners, he stopped by the giant curtain that hid the tiny antique bed (for ten-centimeter damsels, one thousand centimeters of virginity: was the bed curtain an illustration of this feat of maternal fashion design?) and by the sister's

clothes of mourning. She held her hat in hand, although she had obviously been there for some time already — this gesture at once made her obnoxious in his eyes. She was very pale; her hair was pressed into shapely waves, but while such artificial waves hover above certain faces like the dizzying wreaths of play, here they merely laid bare the crippled nature of artifice — never had waves been so un-waving as on this head. They were like a lightning-fast violin passage rendered with the stuttering skills of an apprentice violinist: even if mathematically every tone may be pitch-perfect, the whole is no more than a Bruegheliad. In truth they were “wave”-shaped waves. The hair sat on her like a wig that might fall off at any moment: there was no trace of psychology in its color or texture — and yet where should a widow be wearing her soul if not on her permed head? Not by any chance in her “interior,” or “heart”?

Under her low, empty brow and her long, arched eyebrows two huge eyes hovered. Sentimental, passionately deep mirrors, which were at first sight nevertheless gaudy denials of “nuance,” of the millstones, cypresses, blue mountain cliffs. Where did this duality come from: the alternating voices of poeticism, or violin-spheres on the one hand, and of inquisitorial limitedness and aridity on the other? The cause must be some banal physical trait, for instance, the fact that what on others as a rule measures two millimeters, here is one millimeter, or the other way round; the sheer fact of their excessive bigness explains this duality. They were sad eyes, but even this sadness gave the impression of clumsy defiance and girlish ignorance. One couldn’t explain these eyes by labeling them histrionic, mask-like: the entire woman was infinitely removed from any kind of posturing. Were they insulated eyes? Did they sit among the face’s lime crystals like a chord complicatedly mixed into an exquisite harmony, surrounded by a thousand cacophonous noises? Did the reflection of the skull-face’s wry Puritanism fall on whatever was poetry in their color and size? An eerie, mystical burning glowed darkly in those foliage-density gathering eyes, lake and ostinato-topaz, without wood or coal, oil or oxygen: and yet it burned on. Perhaps it was precisely this physical excess of beauty that rendered them prosaic: they were overmuch an object, just as the waves in her hair were too much lexicon waves. If one imagines an eye separated from the face, on one’s palm, it will inevitably appear hideous — all of a sudden, pupil and its colored ring lose their dimensions, becoming meaningless mathematical locations on a white sphere. When he imagined the sister’s eyes afloat in a bottle of formaldehyde, he found those eyes beautiful even *there*: they had shades even without the shades cast by the lid; even there, the vitreous body’s jelly was psychic foliage-density. Was it the poetry of inexpressiveness at its highest degree, or the deadly barrenness of absolute psychic shining? In nature’s experimental garden those eyes were like certain over-refined fruits — grapes: and every single grape on the bunch is huge,

falling on the others in wondrously swollen and slender ovals, like the fog-hormones of Io-seeking Zeus; their color is gold and pallor, spring-green and autumn-velvet — but their taste is nil or sour, their seeds large and spiky, their peel thick, unchewable and bitter; the most refined is here *at once* monstrous and ideal. Those eyes were like that, it seems — some kind of inner lie, pathology of perfection. But their pathology was no Basedow-like swolleness: even in their huge proportions they were soft, pastel-like, free of plasticism. This woman had perhaps never yet looked with these eyes: was their soul-permeatedness not in fact a soul-lessness? “Absolute” mirror: if a flower falls into the eye, she will not “see” it, but the flower chemically transforms, re-colors, reshapes the eyes’ substance, and in this way the eyes’ wondrous richness is this chemical anarchy — the vegetal, mushroom-like proliferation of millions of lights and forms on the iris and the pupil-ring — because they couldn’t penetrate as deep as her consciousness, they shot roots and a million parasite branches and leaves, *outside*: on the eye’s body itself. This would be a particularly interesting version of blindness: absolute *seeing* and never looking, which transforms the eyeball chemically, botanically, as a thousand kinds of seed transform a miraculous soil. These eyes resembled, to the point of identity, the mother’s eyes, yet there this poetry of barrenness was not felt in the least. One moment he delighted in seeing the mother’s lucidity replicated in a young woman’s body, beautified, made acceptable by this young femininity — the next moment he felt that there could be nothing drearier than this impotence to experience, emanating from such a young woman.

He looked at the people sitting in the room again and again. “They’re all dead.” And then said, with an almost religious greed: this is good, this is the way it has to be, it couldn’t have happened otherwise with me. “Come, join me against the family,” that is what he said to the portrait — but why? Why *against*? The world of “nuances” (water-mill! mountain cliffs! cypresses!) and the world of woman-shaped death are far too large realities to be drawn into the ridiculous comings-and-goings of enmity, of pro and con. Strangely, his two thoughts, that attacking the sister’s death-eyes would be ridiculous, and on the other hand, that some day he would kill this woman and the deed would be the only achievement of his marriage, this murder would be his wife’s money, clothes, nudity, and offspring: those two thoughts occurred to him at the same time, without disturbing one another in the least. He almost saw the sister dead, as a stairway railing’s last baluster on the verge of the night, and explained to her in haste: “I didn’t hate you, I didn’t, not for one moment!” Hatred, murder, is triggered by speech, by action: if only this face could go on hovering silently forever, it could not be hated — a phenomenon cannot but be beautiful. But it will most definitely speak — one could tell by her posture that it will do nothing

but speak, that she will consciously go to great lengths to avoid the possibility of being “phenomenon.”

21.

When he stepped in front of the sister, he hastened to express his sympathies for her bereavement. “Thank you,” she said in a voice that was the perfect continuation of her whole appearance: one couldn’t tell if it strove to be a *recherché* salon-glacial voice that hides all feelings, or if, on the contrary, it was sincere feeling that distorted it, making it sound so arid, reminiscent of the dull thumping of wooden statues. “So you will excuse me if I go down right now to talk with the gardener about the wreaths,” she said, turning to her mother. Then all of a sudden, to the young man: “We have heard that you are now the mayor’s secretary.” “Yes indeed, where have you heard it from? I thought I would, I could be the first to tell the news, because I’m coming from him.” “O, we have our own secret spies, we knew it before you did.” “I’m in a dangerous situation, I had better watch out.” “Indeed you had better,” the sister said in her clay-like, stocky voice, which was made all the stranger by the fact that not the slightest shade of humor could be detected in it. She said each word with painstaking stress — one could tell that speech was a logical burden to her, that she took words seriously, as she did the money that she was incapable of playing with. “By the way, when do you want to have the wedding?” the bishop standing about in his funeral finery asked all of a sudden. (The keening women were still in the room.)

He looked at his fiancée: she was sitting on the edge of the bed with drooping shoulders and hanging head, like a scolded child. The large white curtains fell in broad clouds, shells and petals, making it impossible not to think of Jupiter approaching Io. Is this then the foreplay of the nuptials; is this how marriage begins? How scrawny and meaningless she is! The oft-mentioned “virginity” was like some old piece of furniture, or a clock ticking away perpetually under a bell jar: wonderful and boring, valuable and ridiculous, an antiquarian item in which only weak-chested pedants and seventyish snobs can find some interest. The word “marriage” and its reality became for him forever identical with the setting of this scene: the bishop, attempting in vain to tuck his tulle handkerchief into his shirtsleeve, because the black coat-of-arms was embroidered on it in such a hard thread that the fabric wouldn’t fold (black seal on a dandelion puff-head!), the keening women’s purple nose and bony hands, as they keep sniffing left, right, and center, like beagles after the servants had torn the game from their jaws; the grumpy soldiers in their black robes tossed to the side; a couple of dawdling old baronets as they dangle their

stiffly held out fingers, because they got muddy and wet at the grave; a girl's bed made of creaking wood, not slept in for years, with bed-laces ironed and starched into awkward angles; giant alcove-curtain, meaninglessly vegetating above the crippled bed-casket; a shrunken little man on the edge of the bed, as he blinks fearfully in his direction and in the direction of the burial's impassive administrators.

What kind of body could the sister's have been? How much would that certain *jus primae noctis* been only a *jus* in her life, how fully was she a codex- and canon-woman, far removed from pleasure and even farther from tragedy? There is nothing more frightening than such a puppet of matrimonial rights in place of the woman — even now she was the schemata of “the latest dispositions regarding the widow,” of “inheritance,” not a human being. And precisely because of this she had an overwhelming erotic aura: this was her chastity in widowhood, her Lesbos-ostentation in her abstract state: her body radiated unself-consciousness to such extent, it was so clear from her voice and gestures that her flesh-substance had never been used as flesh-substance, that this emanated a beastly spiciness. On her lips one could read: “the wife kisses the husband,” on her hands one could read: “the mother defends her child,” in her eyes one could read: “the sister watches over her younger brother, so he doesn't fall into the hands of depraved women”: and these principles and articles forever insulated her from kiss, child, body, her clothes of mourning highlighting this insulation in the clearest possible terms.

The prospective relatives who continued discussing the date of his marriage were an unspeakably cowardly bunch: one could see that they had no inkling of life and reality, and that everything is the result of their trembling fearfulness — the bride was cowardly like a punished child made to stand in the corner, the sister was cowardly like a magistrate who attempts to ward off a rampant revolution with obsolete articles of law, the mother was cowardly like a demented suicidal bird who in her frenzy flung herself on a spearhead. And while he himself was cowardly, how different his cowardice was from theirs! And yet the cowards in black held him firmly in their grasp. “When are you going to take your vows?” The vow: what is that? Some official custom, contract, signature, like the ones filled in by vendors for their transactions. The vow? Calling God as witness? God: where are you — who are you, to be dragged into this company's puny machinations? God: this is the grand mania of saints, the dreadful ascetic logic of ermine-wrapped priests, loneliness' most mordant liquor, the sum total of male secrets and male Art Nouveau.

To these people? To take the vow? To recite in public? To call You, Lord, as witness, here? Clad in too tight clothes in which one sweats profusely? To smell nauseating incense from the altar? What for — who has willed it? He could not suffer this preposterous mingling of bureaucracy and rabid theology that the word “vow”

embodied. And all of a sudden he realized how infinitely he hated this sister. He felt hatred under his chin like a glass cube: the cube was transparent like air, was like nothingness baked in a mold: the cube was sharp and precise, it was what it was: hard, unbreakable, heavy: nuptial-kiss on gravity's leaden lips. The amateurs loitering about would call hatred a whirling ocean, or gushing lava, but they didn't cover his case — his hatred was not a passion, not an "emotion," and not a "principle," but some mathematical intentionality of his whole young life, an abstract line. I will live in this dual world forever: to be inebriated by the beauty of my enemies, to look at my murderers as one looks at a flower, to listen to their curses as one would listen to a clavicebalo sonata: oblivious to the fact that they are humans, moral beings, and to sense them only as stains of color, musical conceits, and delight in them. And then again to suddenly obey the glass-cube's punctual power, which had also been present in me throughout, distant and foreign, invisibly balancing the sweet frivolity of dehumanizing impressionism.

That's why I have to be in the town-hall among state-bells and state-candles, state-whores and state-heroes, state-mimes and state-animals, so that my dual perception of man may flower to its fullest: my precise hatred and imprecise love. In how many ways I have imagined, in the course of a few brief moments, the sister in this sad bedroom: I saw her in bed, with a deathly pallor on her face, in her nightshirt peeling off her shoulders like sunburnt skin, as she gazes at the small phial of poison with which I would take her life — death, now, will for the first time release her body from her body: her breasts swing in death's monsoon like a yellow daffodil that opened today, these two fairy glands are all cool gold, all snaky-shell-like petals — and the frightened sister is scared not of death but of her beauty, of her nipples' charging, bell-ringing rose-ness, that stings her more than the snakes' bites stung Cleopatra: mother and doctors see on her body the grey creepers and Cyrillic puzzlegrass-growth of death, but she knows that death is a secondary matter, something she knows, something she had been at one with since childhood — what is killing her is her own beauty weighing her down because of the green poison. O, some day you must expiate for having appeared before me in the funeral staffage! You will become a Baccha, my mistress, my murderer. Some day I will stand before my judges because of you, between the giant, senseless balance's two scales, I, the exact pointer: in one scale the judges, the law with its "truths" incommunicable to humans — in the other, you, the woman, the female mask with its million-color nihilism incommunicable to humans.

A destiny I need to assume — the calla down in the greenhouse, the illuminated initial of my love-litany, is grand and beautiful, but its end is yet more important and beautiful: the Parcae, the marriage, the vow, the murder.

"When are you going to take the vow," she said, looking at his bride, "when will be the day?" Startled, the fright-sparrow perching on the bed's edge looked at the mother. The mother said nothing, only watched the bishop's mouth for what he would say next. Power of the cowardly: the bishop was like a conductor or an alchemist, who shapes the voices and substances of fear into classic forms: from the bride's playroom shivering, the mother's spleen reminiscent of infinite marshlands, he fashioned one date: "Next Sunday." "All right," he wanted to say, but his throat gave no sound. Dark fell.

22.

Wherefore the mountains, clouds, flowers? When all there is is human beings? Never had he felt more their only-human nature as in these days: never had landscapes and time been murdered with such resoluteness as the mourning family did in this moment. There was no escape, everything was human here, he had to adapt, re-orchestrate his whole life to humans. Was it possible in such a short time? Slowly the bridges' shadows lay down on the rivers, as if they had poured out like resin from the pillars: what did it mean for him now, starting from the knowledge of his wedding date — what does it mean, counted in humans? Where can he find a dictionary, a conversion device for it? What will become of us, my bride? While you were perching on the bed and I watched you with eyes hollowed by melancholia, a bitter version of annunciation came to my mind. You the Mary, I the messenger angel: above us, destiny, the Moon, or a gospel, falling star or redemption — in any case, something very black and divine. Around us, the trees in spring: there is no more mysterious light-canon in the world than the lightest-green buds and the Moon taken together. The buds are already half-open, quivering with a hum between the point's needle-minimum and the foliage's rose-flames — the twigs are being strung away from them, and against them, cobweb-like, but never with them. The clouds are gliding upwards in dizzying diagonals, like incense smoke on a rail, their edge silvery from death's *toga praetexta*, their insides all rust-bubbles — and above them all, the Moon, surrounded by a few stars: its halo is like the white organza collar of certain evening gowns that flow in spirals and paragraph lines down women's arms, breasts, sometimes down to their ankles — diaphanous and mist-like, sharp and diffuse, erotic and Artemisian. The stars are lonesome, forsaken soprano-splinters, aquarelle-buttons not yet touched by the wet brush that is preparing to daub the Moon on the firmament of the Annunciation. This spring night is ours, my bride: with its quivering trees, skirt-breezes falling on the stairs. You are sitting by your bed, praying. To your left is the bed, on the right the large, man-size stone amphora, perhaps you inherited

it from the Danaids. Are human beings human if there is no Danaid-fountain by their bed — if by their bed there stands no Danaid-fountain?

The bed is a cassette of small desires, the border, the strait-laced nest, the amateur coffin; the vase speaks of and to boundless desires, it is the bottomless vortex of life's most ancient nostalgias, of perversities and exacting theologies, of true death, true Summa, true kiss. And you, too, bride-Madonna, are reading your petal-paged prayer book between those two. Your hair falls on the pages, among the lines of the letters springing from hair to linden-fruit and from linden-fruit to hair — what prevails in the end: the texts' ancient stiffness, or the snaking tide of your soul piled up in your hair?

Is it not the same if I feel us to be Madonna and messenger-angel, or Eve and serpent? Both tell the same story: a woman is torn from the humanistic idyll of habit, and wrung to become the tragic puppet of God's selfish destiny. Poor woman: your first suitor in Paradise was the devil, the second suitor in the manger was God — are not all brides compelled to suffer these two biblical courtships and this infernal-heavenly *sposalizio*? We suffer it: I am Satan and messenger-angel, you are Eve and Madonna. This is marital eros: not sex, not beauty, but the erstwhile goal in Paradise: "knowledge, knowledge," and the erstwhile goal in the manger: "suffering for the world, for the creature." Don't you feel, my bride, that now, merely by knowing our wedding date, we are already omniscient and omnidolent? The impressions, beautiful pictures and fleshy-leaved neuroses have all wilted off me — I don't see the world: I know it. And it is you I thank for this, Parcae.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

ALESSANDRA FRÒSINI



Federico Gori, *Japanese Tree* (2018)

**FEDERICO GORI:
L'ESSENZIALE OPACITÀ DELLE COSE**

La natura invisibile della vita è descritta da Carl Gustav Jung utilizzando la metafora del rizoma, una mutazione del fusto di molte piante erbacee che apparentemente si presenta come radice per il suo sviluppo orizzontale sottoterra, ma che invece costituisce una parte vera e propria del fusto, con funzione di deposito di nutrienti e da cui può nascere nuova vita.

Quello di rizoma è un concetto cardinale del pensiero di Gilles Deleuze e Felix Guattari, interessati alla sua struttura antigerarchica, diffusiva e dunque come antitesi della struttura “ad albero,” schema a cui si conforma, secondo la coppia di filosofi, tutto il pensiero occidentale in ogni branca del sapere. Il rizoma è il movimento stesso del desiderio: molteplice e moltiplicato, eterogeneo e proliferante.

La ricerca di Federico Gori, artista che indaga il rapporto fra l'uomo e il dato naturale, procede proprio osservando il movimento multidirezionale in continua mutazione, quel processo rizomatico perenne che contraddistingue in profondità la vita.

Per conoscere questo rapporto naturale, che progredisce senza gerarchie interne, è dunque necessario per Gori lavorare perennemente sul frammento, indagato in forma di traccia, attraverso immagini che rappresentano ma non riproducono. In questo modo coglie il dato essenziale e lo astrae mutandolo in archetipo, mettendo in dialogo piani diversi e rendendo visibili livelli trasversali d'interpretazione.

La distanza che si crea, quell'intercapedine fra la traccia del dato reale e l'occhio dell'artista, esercitato attraverso una ritualità serrata del gesto artistico, creano una sospensione spirituale e metafisica fortissima.

Ordine e misura sembrano precetti imprescindibili a cui attenersi per riuscire a cogliere i molteplici passaggi della trasformazione e in qualche modo richiamarli, attraverso opere che mutano impercettibilmente il loro aspetto: l'ossidazione utilizzata in serie come *Underground* (2015, 2017) e *Perenne* (2015) imprime il segno di elementi naturali sulle lastre di rame come su negativi fotografici, cambiando in modo continuo per tutta la loro esistenza. Così la traccia diviene a tutti gli effetti segno metaforico delle trasformazioni dell'essere, cogliendole anche, come nell'installazione *Come afferrare il vento* (2015), nel suo “eterno ritorno,” nel suo instabile e ciclico divenire. Per questo ogni materiale che Gori approccia viene interrogato per il potenziale simbolico di trasformazione che racchiude in sé, rivelato attraverso tecniche differenti con quella profonda forza che le metafore hanno di palesare qualcosa che può essere rivelato solo per vie indirette.

E' una traccia che raddoppia la realtà, intesa nel senso di Derrida, come “un passato che non è mai stato presente” e che può essere rappresentato solo attraverso un insieme di sostituzioni, creando un ponte fra la memoria (mai intera) e il tempo dell'uomo e il senza tempo della storia.



Federico Gori, *Come afferrare il vento* (2015)

Riprendendo la riflessione sull'immagine e la metafora del rizoma di Deleuze-Guattari, lo scrittore, poeta e saggista Édouard Glissant la utilizza per offrire una definizione dell'identità come luogo della relazione, dell'apertura all'altro: "un luogo di scambio tra il «medesimo» e il «diverso» in cui ciò che conta è il nodo, la maniera in cui si entra in contatto con gli altri." Un'identità moltiplicata che reclama il diritto all'opacità, strettamente connesso con la natura composita, multipla e complessa dell'essere umano e della conseguente impossibilità di ridurlo a una dimensione completamente trasparente.



Federico Gori, *Solaterra 26* (2018)

Nella serie *Solaterra* sviluppata da Federico Gori con la collaborazione dello scienziato britannico Robin Edwards, ogni opera mostra sette diversi livelli di altitudine — dalle montagne alla profondità del mare — di una parte della crosta terrestre. Il tratto minuto con cui è rappresentato contemporaneamente ogni diverso livello è frutto di una lenta disciplina, di un rituale, che è essenza stessa dell'opera: una rinnovata preghiera che mette in luce la continua modifica del rapporto dell'uomo non solo con lo spazio e con il tempo, ma anche con la memoria (sia essa collettiva o personale) e la propria identità. Per questo sono l'assenza, la sottrazione sono i dati che più interessano, i piani mancanti e la compenetrazione di quelli esistenti, che portano ad un diverso disegno della realtà e ad un moto perpetuo di riverberi mai percepibile nella sua interezza.



Federico Gori, detail from *Solaterra 26* (2018)

Il più recente esito della ricerca di Gori si concretizza in opere in cui la traccia si è trasformata quasi in un'immagine latente, esposta ma non ancora visibile, che si mostra per affioramento, apparendo come un'epifania. La traccia metaforica delle trasformazioni in atto assume così una dimensione energetica e mentale che afferra l'istantanea sospensione del tempo, che trova punti di contatto con le filosofie di matrice orientale.

Quella che Federico Gori mette in atto è dunque un'indagine sulle matrici della vita, sulle rizomatiche derivazioni che creano le interrelazioni di tutte le cose e di tutti gli eventi.

E la verità sta nel vuoto, nel silenzio, nella pausa che descrive per sottrazione tutta l'opacità dell'essere, in un'attesa che è già accadimento.

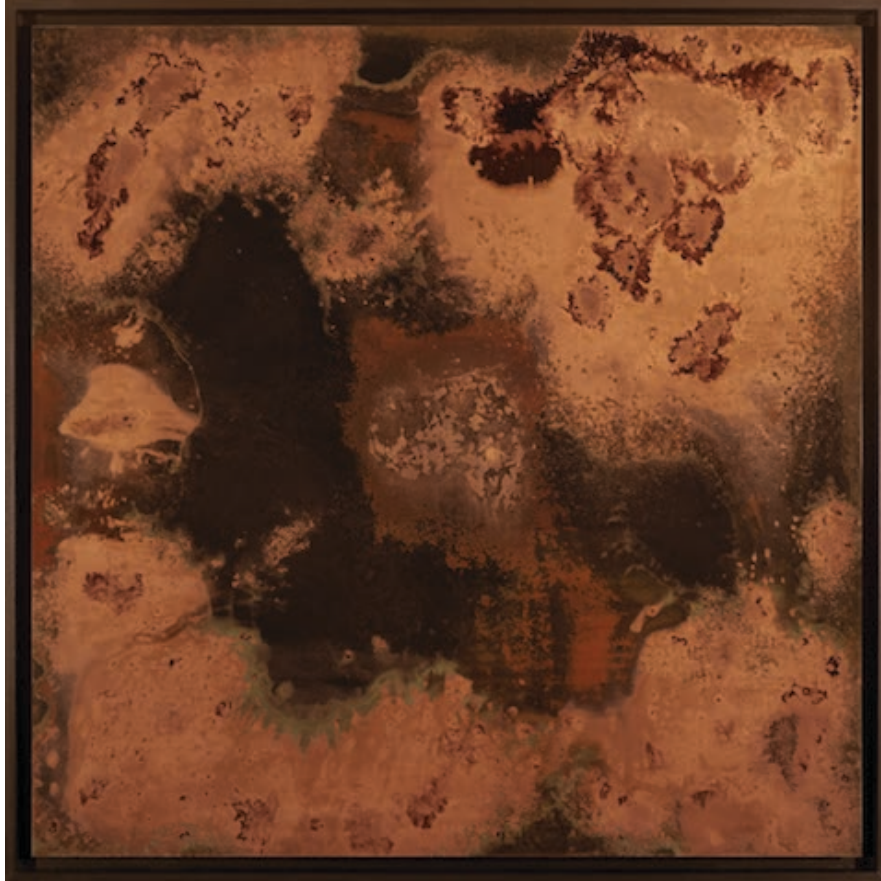
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MARCUS AURELIUS MEDITATION 1 (2018)



MARCUS AURELIUS MEDITATION 2 (2018)



MARCUS AURELIUS MEDITATION 3 (2018)



UNDERGROUND No. 2 and detail (2016)



HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

ALESSANDRA FRÒSINI



Federico Gori, *Japanese Tree* (2018)

**FEDERICO GORI:
THE ESSENTIAL OPACITY OF THINGS**

The invisible nature of life is described by Carl Jung with the metaphor of the rhizome, a mutation of the stem of many herbaceous plants that apparently appears as a root for its horizontal underground development, but which instead constitutes a real part of the stem, with the function of storing nutrients and from which new life can be born.

The concept of the rhizome is a cardinal one of the thought of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who are interested in its anti-hierarchical, diffusive structure and therefore as an antithesis of the “tree” structure, a model which, according to Deleuze & Guattari, conforms to all Western thought in every branch of knowledge. The rhizome is the very movement of desire: multiple and multiplied, heterogeneous and proliferating.

The research of Federico Gori, an artist who investigates the relationship between man and natural elements, proceeds precisely by observing multidirectional movement in continuous mutation, that perennial rhizomatic process which deeply marks life.

To know this natural relationship, which progresses without internal hierarchies, it is necessary for Gori to work perpetually on the fragment, investigated in the form of a trace, through images that represent but do not reproduce. In this way he captures the essential element and abstracts it, mutating it into an archetype, putting different plans into dialogue and making visible transversal levels of interpretation.

The distance that is created, that gap between the trace of the real element and the artist’s eye, exercised through a taut ritual of the artistic gesture, creates a strong spiritual and metaphysical suspension.

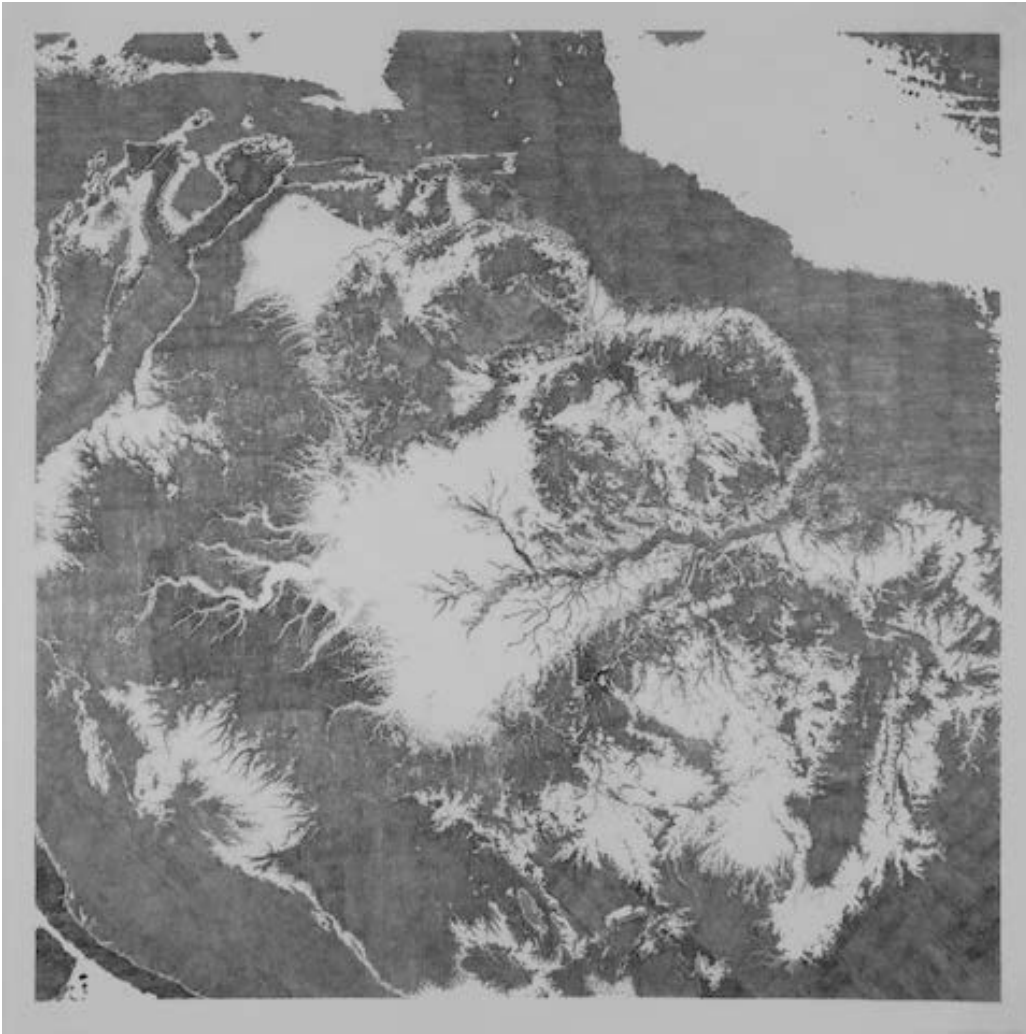
Order and measure seem to be essential precepts to follow so as to grasp the many steps of the transformation and somehow recall them, through works that imperceptibly change their appearance: the oxidation used in series such as *Underground* (2015; 2017) and *Perennial* (2015) imprints the sign of natural elements on copper plates as on photographic negatives, changing continuously throughout their existence. Thus the trace becomes in effect a metaphorical sign of the transformations of being, also taking them, as in the installation *How to Grasp the Wind* (2015), in their “eternal return,” in their unstable and cyclical becoming. For this reason, every material that Gori approaches is questioned for the symbolic potential of transformation that it embodies in and of itself, revealed through different techniques with that profound force which metaphors have to reveal something which can only be revealed indirectly.

It is a trace that doubles reality, understood in Derrida’s sense, as “a past that has never been present” and which can be represented only through a set of substitutions, creating a bridge between memory (never whole) and the time of man versus the timelessness of history.



Federico Gori, *Come afferrare il vento* (2015)

Taking up the reflection on the image and the metaphor of the rhizome of Deleuze-Guattari, the writer, poet, and essayist Édouard Glissant uses it to offer a definition of identity as a site of relationship, of openness to another: “a place of exchange between the ‘same’ and the ‘different’ in which what matters is the knot, the manner in which one comes into contact with others.” A multiplied identity that claims the right to opacity, closely connected to the composite, multiple, and complex nature of the human being and the consequent impossibility of reducing it to a completely transparent dimension.



Federico Gori, *Solaterra 26* (2018)

In the series *Solaterra*, which Gori developed with the collaboration of British scientist Robin Edwards, each work shows seven different levels of altitude (from the mountains to the depth of the sea) of a part of the earth's crust. The minute line with which each different level is represented at the same time is the result of a slow discipline, of a ritual, which is the very essence of the work: a renewed entreaty that highlights the continuous modification of the relationship of man not only with space and time, but also with memory (be it collective or personal) and one's own identity. For this reason they are the absence, the subtraction is the element that most interests us, the missing plans and the interpenetration of the existing ones, which lead to a different design of reality and to a perpetual motion of reverberations never perceived in their entirety.



Federico Gori, detail from *Solaterra 26* (2018)

The most recent outcome of Gori's research is embodied in works in which the trace has transformed itself almost into a latent image, exposed but not yet visible, which appears through outcropping, appearing as a manifestation. The metaphorical traces of the transformations in action thus take on an energetic and mental dimension that seizes the instant suspension of time, which finds points of contact with Oriental philosophies.

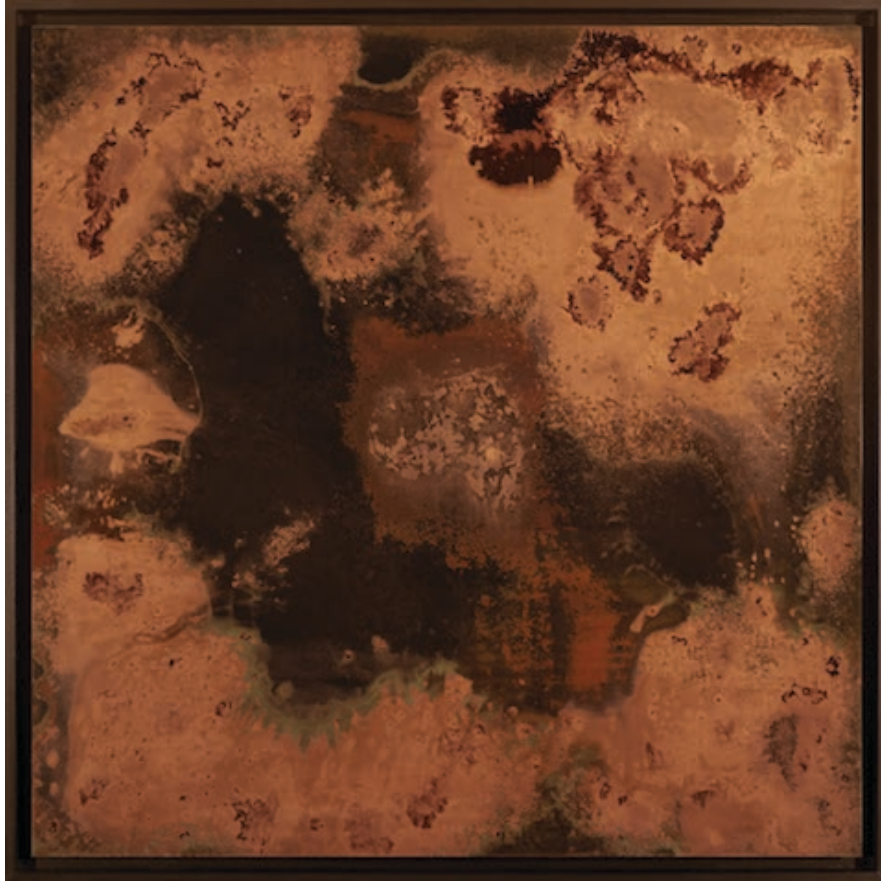
What Federico Gori puts into action is therefore an investigation into the matrixes of life, the rhizomatic derivations that create the interrelationships of all things and of all events.

And the truth lies in the void, in the silence, in an interval that describes through subtraction all the opacity of being, in a deferral that is already happening.

MARCUS AURELIUS MEDITATION 1 (2018)



MARCUS AURELIUS MEDITATION 2 (2018)



MARCUS AURELIUS MEDITATION 3 (2018)



UNDERGROUND No. 2 and detail (2016)



HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

OLLI AHLROOS

THE COURAGE THAT ART DEMANDS¹



Sanna Kekäläinen & Janne Marja-aho in *Hullut* (Insane) 2018. Photo: Uupi Tirronen

Sanna Kekäläinen may well be the most important contemporary Finnish artist although she is overshadowed by the popularity of Finnish composers such as Kaija Saariaho, Magnus Lindberg, and Esa-Pekka Salonen. Kekäläinen's works are not something one goes to see because of instant gratification, easy wittiness, or comfortability. One goes to see Kekäläinen's works like one goes to therapy or to court. The purpose is not to be entertained, but to get to the truth.

¹ Originally published in *Magazin im August* 2017 for the festival Tanz im August / HAU Hebbel am Ufer (Berlin). Translated from the German by Joel Scott.

SURRENDER

From a layperson's point of view, Kekäläinen's artistic practice approaches romantic and sublime ideals: she is one of the exemplary artists of our time.

From Kekäläinen's own point of view, the work of an artist is much more banal and profane: "I don't mystify the life of the artist and I don't consider it to be eccentric compared to other modes of existence. I made the decision to pursue this path in life so early on that it has been carved deep in my identity," she explains. But even if she understands art as one vocation among others, it is apparently possible only through extraordinary effort. "It's a difficult line of work, in which you have to bear a great deal of uncertainty," she says. "But I don't feel that it amounts to a threat or a gamble, not really."

And yet my respect for Kekäläinen's work has a lot to do with this courage. In her view, "It also depends on what world a person was born into. You have to be crazy enough and rational enough. You have to be vulnerable, and also to have had enough positive experiences. Somehow there has to be this damned psychological contradiction in a human being before art can happen." In the 1980s Kekäläinen studied at the London School of Contemporary Dance. In 1986 she helped to found Zodiak Presents, now the Zodiak-Center for New Dance in Helsinki. In 1996 she founded K&C Kekäläinen & Company, which she still directs.

Belonging as she did to the early pioneers of contemporary dance and performance, Kekäläinen hasn't had it easy. From her "Studies on Hysteria" (1991) into the 2000s, Kekäläinen's works met with consternation and were rejected, for instance, by a Helsinki newspaper. In the last few years, this has changed. No one any longer doubts Kekäläinen's work, or her significance. "I emphasize meanings and the construction of meanings, that which can be shown or furthered through art. It's a way of taking a position on the course of the world," she explains. "Ever since my youth I've been asking myself how I could say something, share something. I've witnessed wrongs and injustices. And I want to intervene. 'No compromises' is not something that I think, it's inborn."

A life devoted to art needs courage, including on the part of Maija Karhunen, who dances in "Hafed: Collage of Differences and Fragility." Even today, there is a prevailing (even if only latent) idea of what a dancer's body should look like. Throughout her career, Karhunen has worked against this

normativity — or simply ignored it. “As far as disability is concerned, what’s important to me is that I can be quiet or loud, interested or disinterested, depending on how I feel,” she says. “What’s important, then, is to trust yourself; to be stubborn in the face of norms and expectations. Doing something differently can open up new paths. When you return, when you appear again and again on the stage, the observation of a body that doesn’t correspond to the norms can have a less disconcerting effect. Every artwork creates its own universe, and the fact that as a dancer I lack the ability to walk is mostly completely unimportant,” says Karhunen.

The question to what extent a body is political is an important component of her artistic work. “For the spectator, the body of a disabled woman is of course a screen onto which an unbelievable multitude of things can be projected. My own body can become a stand-in for other disabled women’s bodies. In my view, the political character is linked to how a dancer presents herself, instead of simply becoming the ‘material’ of the choreography.”

THE POLITICAL NATURE OF THE BODY

The ways a woman’s body can exist is also a theme of Kekäläinen’s artistic practice. “For as long as I’ve been making art, one of my starting points has been the political nature of the body.” In “Queer Elegies” (2013) Kekäläinen writes:

*So, let’s take the male body first.
We are now watching a performance.
We are gazing at a naked male performer who is transforming
the meanings of the piece through his naked body.
We are watching, we might even stare at his genitals or not, that’s fine.
We might like the performance or not, doesn’t matter.
But we get absorbed to the world of the piece through his naked body,
and we accept it as a part of the whole, so everything is fine.
Let’s now change to the female body.
We are watching the same performance.
There is the naked female performer we are gazing at and we are reading the
chain of meanings of the performance through her naked body,
we might even stare, that’s fine.
We get drawn in the world of the piece, and we accept her naked body
as a part of the aesthetics.
As soon as the naked female performer opens her legs and shows her inner fe-
male genitals, her inner female space, the whole situation turns into pornogra-*

phy, no matter what.

*So, I have come to the conclusion with my investigations during these years
that the inner female genital is forbidden.*

If we accept that the concept 'political' is inscribed in the meanings of the words 'art' and 'body', then 'body art' describes Kekäläinen's works better than many other categories. Their performers are often present as speaking, political bodies that move in strange ways. Often they are naked. If we take the discursive and art-historical background of Kekäläinen's career into account, then we have to refer to the works as contemporary dance — though how well this term describes their special quality is another matter.

For in the last 30 years contemporary dance has become more abstract, a development that has expanded the expressive means of the form, but also helped promote a fashionable, collaged aesthetic in many works. In my opinion, the particular quality of Kekäläinen's practice lies in the fact that in her works, form and content, subject matter and experiment, concept and body are almost always inextricably bound up with each other.

ABSTRACTION

Kekäläinen places the tension, the difference between the bodily and the abstract on stage. This difference is echoed in her work by other, analogous differences: between public and private, spectacle and intimacy. The particular quality of these performances has much to do with the relation between spectators and performers. "From a political perspective, the relation refers to the difference between the spectacle and the private," explains the choreographer. "I'm criticizing the spectacle as the starting point of a performance. But how is meaning constructed in a spectacle? And how is it constructed in the private sphere? The spectacle is an instrument for directing the flow of money and power, that's how meaning is constructed. I want to break open this status quo."

A further excerpt from "Queer Elegies":

All meanings are between us Human Beings.

Our meanings don't come from the head or heaven.

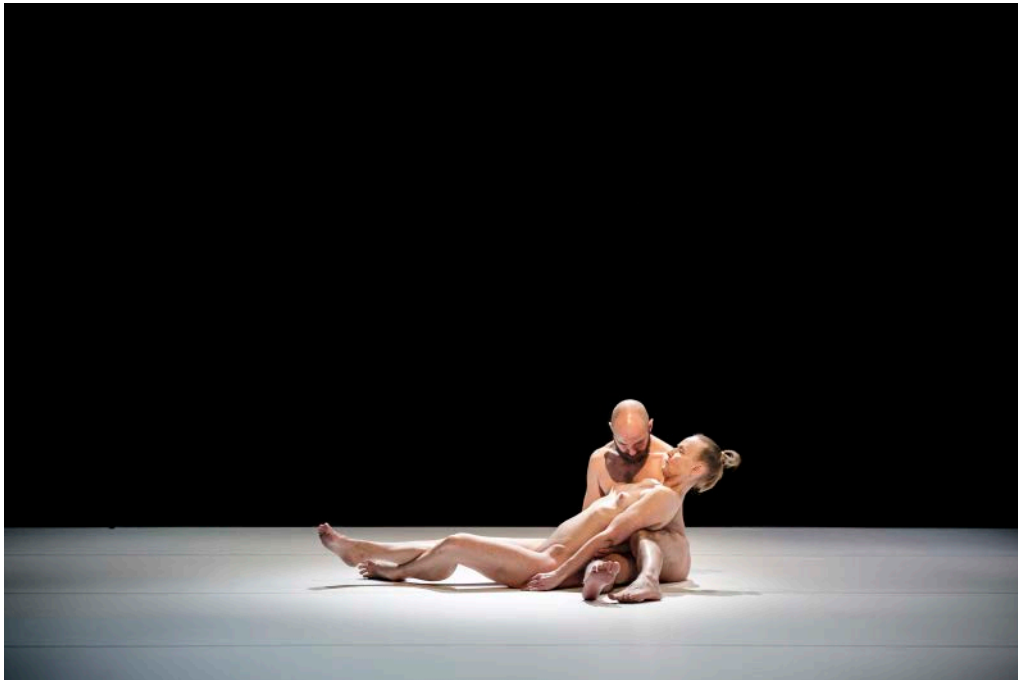
This is a proposal for a representation of gender on stage.

[...]

Couple of things during this proposal for a representation of gender on stage.

In what kind of discourse is this representation on stage happening?

*Is this discourse private or spectacular?
I divide art into [sic] private and spectacle.
How does the private combine and create meanings and how does the spectacle
which is ruled by media, money, and power combine meanings?
The difference is huge and systematic.
My stage is private.*



Sanna Kekäläinen & Janne Marja-aho in *Hullut* (Insane) (2018). Photo: Uupi Tirronen

Kekäläinen's most recent works have been conceived in response to the problem of the stage. The expression 'private stage' in this excerpt was presumably formulated in awareness of its paradoxical nature. It is contradictory in precisely the same way as the notion of a 'private language,' since both language and stage are by their nature public. So how can a stage be private? As a private structure that has opened itself via a public stage structure? "In our time, in which such heavy cracks are opening in meanings, I propose looking even more carefully at what constitutes this archaic situation in which somebody presents something and others watch." Kekäläinen's formulation is decidedly radical: "Direct representation is dead to me now. It no longer exists."

What are Kekäläinen's artistic productions if not representations? One possible answer is simulations. That requires us to take the meaning of simulation literally. In my experience as a viewer, the aim has seemed to be not

the portrayal, but literally the simulation of the private within the public space of the stage. Performers and spectators together attempt to explore first of all a certain private phenomenon, and secondly the 'private self,' by setting up a structure that can be shared and that is also more easily observed. It is an experiment carried out with the help of art, a social and political experiment. "Art is a means of reflection: the mirror that human beings have desired. Human beings want their own image, they want to draw it and look at it, hear it and see it."

Karhunen's personal experience in her work with Kekäläinen confirms this interpretation. "The simulation of privacy seems to generate for the stage a way of being that also enables the performers to be honest, transparent." The special quality of Kekäläinen's works depends on how well and how transparently a private construction of meanings can be simulated, and how honestly we are forced by them to look at ourselves. Kekäläinen herself thinks that her way of realizing the 'private' and the 'private stage' resembles the practices of psychoanalysis: the first practice is the method of free association, the second the "the situation of psychoanalysis: the loneliness that two beings share with one another."

THE POSSIBILITIES OF ART

"Everything called 'art' is questioned," says Kekäläinen of the political atmosphere in Finland. "It becomes a term of abuse. Now we are set up as 'those who make you feel good.' As if art didn't do that anyway, as long as there's at least the whiff of an idea in it. Many aren't aware of that." She seems genuinely worried. "There's something fascistic in that, in my view, portraying art as the bearer of good feelings. It's frightening."

In Finland we're used to seeing only those who are interested in contemporary art speak publicly about it, those who are touched by it and have devoted themselves to it. Readers can reflect for themselves on whether that is especially desirable. As an artist living in a relatively free world, Kekäläinen believes that she is witnessing a period of upheaval. Those hostile to contemporary art now also express themselves openly. "I've never asked for permission and no one ever forbade me from doing anything. I've been demonized and condemned and abuse has been hurled at me. But nobody ever forbade

me from doing anything. And it's not just about me. But I consider it a definite possibility that things will soon start to be forbidden."

It is time to resist, not to give up. "An important thing would be to open ourselves up to what will happen," says Kekäläinen. "It is time to show the other possibilities: curiosity, tolerance, and love."

Although the attempt has been made in the past to exploit art on behalf of various ideologies and forces, critical and political art flourished during the last centuries both in times of oppression, exploitation, and suffering, and afterwards. History has taught us that art can indeed be a locus of resistance. "Terrible times are also an opportunity for art. I believe that art is a tremendous power," says Kekäläinen. The power of art shows itself "in knowledge, in insight, in sharing a moment, in the fact that it overcomes feeling, time, gender, race, language. Art is universal... if we allow it to be."



Janne Marja-aho in *Studien über Hysterie Zwei* (2017).

Photo: Uupi Tirronen

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

RIIKKA LAAKSO



THE BEAST – A Book in an Orange Tent (2011). Photo: Sari Tervaniemi

THE ROUTES OF A NYMPH: A SHAPING BODY IN THE POETICS OF SANNA KEKÄLÄINEN

1

I have been working with this gender-issue for 24 years. (...)

This chain of meanings is 24 years old.

Sanna Kekäläinen: *Queer Elegies* (2013)

A naked woman standing on stage. The blond hair is tied in a messy topknot, and she's not wearing any make-up. Her lean body is simultaneously alert and relaxed; the strongly grounded feet turn slightly outwards, but without being forced. The woman looks straight at the audience. She doesn't smile.

Sanna Kekäläinen's presence contains something eminently recognizable, something she emanates in every performance. Her studies in European contemporary dance schools in London and Amsterdam, her beginnings in performance groups like Homo \$, and dancing for Finnish choreographers like Ulla Koivisto or Ervi Sirén in the 80's form a base for this corporeality. But above all, Kekäläinen's over 70 creations as a dancer-choreographer have enabled an endless expedition into the body, an immersion in its sediments: into the materiality and movement. This stage-presence has been cultivated for over 35 years, and now all thought and motion explored during her entire artistic career flourishes in the body, revealing a remarkably unique poetics of dance.

Kekäläinen belongs to the wide and heterogeneous group of choreographers intrigued by an avant-garde approach to dance: an alternative to the dance of figures constructed by classical ballet techniques, or to the dynamic bodies produced through the methodologies of modern dance. Dance and life started to converge in the 60s, when a variety of Judson Dance Theater choreographers found inspiration in everyday movements (walking, sitting, running) or employed common people in their performances along with professional dancers. This *new dance* or *postmodern dance* promoted an existential approach to movement, and the interest in experience and presence led to working through processes, where theatrical *representation* was substituted by a *presentation* of movement on stage.

When new dance reached Finland, Kekäläinen was clearing the road for this new art form in the 80s and 90s. The established working patterns of dance were questioned, when the independent choreographers interested in this novel dancing did not found a traditional dance company, but rather an alliance named Zodiak Presents: a community offering networks, structures, and peer support to its founder-members, as well as a certain artistic and political credibility. Still, Kekäläinen decided to go her own way already in 1996 by founding Ruumiillisen taiteen teatteri (Physical Art Theatre), and the same unconditional work currently continues under the name Kekäläinen & Company.

Kekäläinen divides her artistic career into two periods, where the early-Kekäläinen period develops from the early choreographies until the piece *Puna-Red-Rouge* (2007). Through this performance a way of "redefining without defining" and "making space for difference and unfamiliarity" appeared; a need to challenge familiar and safe social conventions, and to agitate normalized patterns of thinking.¹ From this point of inflection onwards, the work of Kekäläinen could be described as a subtle essence, a sort of poetry of undressed movement, where a multilayered thinking coalesces in a private but extremely political presence.

¹ Hannele Jyrkkä: *Tanssija haluaa erilaisuudelle lisää tilaa* (Helsingin Sanomat 16.5.2014).



Onni-Bonheur-Happiness (2009). Photo: Sari Tervaniemi

Kekäläinen's stage is undressed as well: a plain white linoleum. The mise-en-scène may consist of a simple table, or a couple of white chairs, maybe Kekäläinen's oft-used old-fashioned orange tent, or a lone inflatable boat. Her stage is a laboratory of physicality, where a variety of meanings is explored through movement, words,

and objects.² During the last years the work of Kekäläinen has also gone through a visual undressing, when the impressive stage-images elaborated through lightning in *Onni-Bonheur-Happiness* (2009) or *THE BEAST — A Book in an Orange Tent* (2011) have been replaced by a dogma-like technical solution, where the choreographer herself partly manipulates the lights and sound on stage. By revealing these theatrical resources, and integrating them as actions on stage, the technique fuses with Kekäläinen's artistic manifesto of rejecting the spectacular and the artificial.

The spectacular mainstream imaginary, a flow of images produced by money and power,³ is the opposite of Kekäläinen's work, which is based on curiosity and innocence, as the texts of *Speech & Spectacle* (2014) subtly suggest. Curiosity also signifies a 'thirst for knowledge,' the desire to know, while innocence literally means 'guiltlessness.' Anybody familiar with Kekäläinen's art knows that the 'innocence' of her performances is relative: her stage is loaded with wounding intellectual dynamite. Its power of explosion is directed towards the cruelty of capitalism, the perversions of the society of spectacle, toward gender as a disciplinary action or relations to otherness and the other — particularly when that 'other' is oneself. Kekäläinen is guilty of cutting the mainstream's spectacular images into pieces, of exploding them, so that the silent and innocent knowledge residing under the image — in the body itself — can be revealed.

If the majority of images surrounding us are generated by the hegemony and form the imagery that establishes and maintains the current state of power in the world, is it possible to create other type of images? Foucault reminds us that the mechanisms of power impact directly on the body,⁴ and Kekäläinen desires to understand this use of power, a sort of indirect violence, through a wide and precise thinking. Her research delves into the forms of a disciplinary power — normalized and therefore remaining invisible in 21st-century society — to critically discuss them in her art: through her own body.

² Kekäläinen & Company's own space, The Physical Art Theatre at Cable Factory (Helsinki), accentuates the impression of a laboratory of physicality: the white linoleum extends into the space through the whiteness of the walls, so that the dancer (or dancers) seem to be inside a blank box. In other theatrical spaces this linoleum is placed in the middle of pre-existing structures — like the grey cement of the industrial Pannuhalli stage or the modern red walls of the Kiasma Theatre — where the white linoleum frames a sacred space for investigating physicality.

³ "I divide art to private and spectacle. How does the private combine and create meanings and how does the spectacle which is ruled by media, money, and power combine meanings? The difference is huge and systematic. My stage is private." Sanna Kekäläinen, *Queer Elegies* (2013).

⁴ For more about the impact of disciplinary power on the body see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977).



Queer Elegies (2013). Photo: FNG/CAA/Pirje Mykkänen

The present article observes Kekäläinen's work particularly from 2013 until 2017: from her piece *Queer Elegies* to the performance *Whorescope*. During this period her work's themes are strongly attached to the female body, the performing of gender and *queer*-theories. Simultaneously the corporeality itself transmits a positioning in relation to women's existence in contemporary society.

The political tension inherent in a female body, its position as the 'other' of our patriarchal society, has been at the core of Kekäläinen's art for some time. Since the beginning of her career she has been inspired both by feminist writing and by insurgent and subversive female figures. The mythic and erotic Lilith taking over her own body and sexuality by abandoning Eden, Santa Teresa de Ávila's ecstatic encounter with God as an allegory of a female orgasm, or the experiential being of hysterical women are present in several of Kekäläinen's performances. These self-determining and independent women reveal a strong contact with their own corporeality and sexuality, confronting the traditional understanding of beauty of their times: the fe-

male bodies are not pleasant images, but impudent flesh composed of ecstasy, lust, obscenity, exaltation and destruction, of grotesque and hysterical essence. In a society habitually placing a female body to feed a (masculine) sexual desire, to nourish it at the cost of the woman's own desire, the experiential stage-images of Kekäläinen are immersed in this subversive corporeality; in a presence of flesh that penetrates the existence of these women.⁵

2

In the late 19th century Jean-Martin Charcot started to observe and document the corporeality of hysterical women, keen to understand the state of mind of these all-female patients locked up in the Salpêtrière Hospital. Their bodies seemed to be penetrated by agitation and sensation, when the emotion (pathos) drew and was drawn straight into the flesh; into the skin's creases and tremblings, into violently arching backs and repetitively convulsing muscles. It was impossible to explain the mode of being of these female bodies through medicine. Thus, the meticulous documentation that Charcot gathered, describes the corporeality of these women as an extremely strong and chaotic physical poetry.⁶ This kind of *porous body* is the base of Kekäläinen's artistic practice. As the choreographer herself describes, the words born through her thinking and writing "get absorbed into arms and legs,"⁷ penetrating into her body. The words don't turn into an understandable or 'readable' movement language or illustration (mimesis), but into a contradictory bodily thinking. Kekäläinen's dance is "*being* in the question";⁸ *being* in the ambivalence is what makes her body move. From these frequently existential questions involving a variety of answers — or attempts to answer — emerges a paradox of bodily contradictions and movement. Kekäläinen's skin seems to become thinner, turning almost transparent, while the whole body softens and becomes a receptive material, where this physical poetry is molded.

⁵ For more about nakedness and the female body as something 'to be looked at,' see John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

⁶ All the references to hysteria in this article are related to Didi-Huberman's book *Invention of Hysteria. Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (London: The MIT Press, 2003). Didi-Huberman analyses how Charcot presented hysteria to the world outside the hospital. In his public "Tuesday lectures" the hysterical women performed to the audience following Charcot's instructions, to the point that Didi-Huberman calls him "the choreographer of hysteria." Charcot turned hysteria into a supernatural spectacle, with the female patients having the leading role as intriguing and sexualized freaks of nature, and this negative connotation informs hysteria even today.

⁷ Text in *Diva Vulva*.

⁸ A post-performance conversation with the audience at Tanz Im August 31.8. 2017. Sophiensale, Berlin.

The corporeality of Kekäläinen is at the same time enchanting and confusing, intriguing and fascinating, even frightening. Above all, it's unreachable: a multi-layered chain of thought in *bodily thinking*, which seems to speak simultaneously in several languages. The body is at once heavy and light, vibrant and immobile, hot and cold, full of syncope and life, and so on. The at times wide and excessive dancing suddenly turns minimalistic and intimate, or even almost imperceptible, while the body continuously filters this mystical, violent, and poetic state of flesh into its surroundings. A long-term research into corporeality enables this bonfire of paradoxes — “a conflagration of all paradoxes in a single gesture”⁹ — to appear in Kekäläinen's dance of being.

When the pelvis curves and winds, and the arching back twists the spine into a spiral, Kekäläinen's body parts manage to almost dislocate: the movement's force breaks her into pieces. Freud described how hysteria moved the bodies in such a violent manner that it seemed to ignore human anatomy,¹⁰ and the coerced and extreme movements stretched to encompass quite inhumane characteristics. Hysteria revealed itself to the observer as an irrational, odd language. The strength springing from the depths of the body draws on Kekäläinen's flesh, transforming her into a living sculpture of suffering and agony; into the same kind of visual poetry that was embodied in hysteria.

This *bodily catastrophe* — or catastrophic body — is a central element in Francis Bacon's paintings. The bodies, whose way of being Bacon describes, are endlessly seeking to escape from their own figuration into their own materiality, or into the surrounding space, by swirling around themselves or around a concrete point of the painting. The intensity of this twisting fades the body's contours; forms turn into formlessness.¹¹ Bacon's wide, dynamic, and faded brush marks equate with Kekäläinen's abrupt and intense movements: with the sudden changes of direction or constantly transforming ways of being where the body's form attempts to escape. This incessant metamorphosis can't be captured in one image or representative portrait.

Both in Bacon's adaptations of the *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* and in Kekäläinen's staged version about the same painting,¹² the body seeks an escape

⁹ Didi-Huberman 2003: 74.

¹⁰ Didi-Huberman 2003: 128. Even though, Didi-Huberman considers Freud's statement to contain certain 'naivety'. See Freud, “Some Points for a Comparative Study of Organic and Hysterical Motor Paralyses,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1962) Vol. I: 168–169.

¹¹ For more about Francis Bacon, see Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (London: Continuum, 2003).

¹² In the performance *The Beast — A Book in an Orange Tent* (2011), Kekäläinen created a sarcastic and strong stage image based on Bacon's variations of *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* from the 50s and

through the open mouth. In both, a hysterical, asphyxiated shout penetrates the entire body distorting the face: a grotesque jaw is drawn in place of the mouth, though which the body's internal state is released to the surrounding world. Simultaneously the shout fades any sign of humanity in the figure, transforming its flesh into an embodiment of a chaotic being.

The corporeality that this shout brings out is as indescribable and mobile as the penetrating shout of Robert Graves' homonymous story *The Shout*: its horror is not attached to a certain note, tone, or vibration, since it's able to embody any sound. The inaccessible shout doesn't mean anything, its *significance* can't be described, but at the same time it is *significant*; the presence of a body penetrated by the shout, even the opportunity to observe a distorted face without perceiving the sound itself, resonates in the viewer's body for several days. Didi-Huberman points out how the hysterical body *demand*s a kind of raw and painful theatrical essence, an essence that the art of theater of the late 19th-century "would have trembled to encounter."¹³ This mutating force moving in a trembling hysterical body, or in a body distorted by a penetrating shout, contains a painful presence of truth.

How to reveal a truth of a body for the eyes of a spectator without turning it into a representation? How to avoid the weight, the demands and desires to please, that being watched sets to a body?

Kekäläinen is constantly asking *who* or *what* the body is, or *whether* this body is her body. Escaping illustration and representation, its logic of spectacle based on figures, she presents a shaping, mobile, unreachable, present and changing body on stage.

When Kekäläinen appears in front of the audience in her performances, she doesn't want to hide behind forms: she refuses to close up her body, to protect herself from a piercing gaze. Instead, she allows the gaze to penetrate into her open and vulnerable corporeality, revealing its immeasurable sediments. She is the shout that has no *significance*, but in its sincerity is extremely *significant*. Kekäläinen often describes her stage as 'intimate,'¹⁴ *private*, which derives from the Latin verb *privare*, meaning to deny and protect from others' gazes. Through her honest presence she brings in front of the gaze something so valuable and vulnerable, that its viewing should be restricted; protected from others' sight.

Thus, instead of understanding, Kekäläinen's dance can only be approached through contemplation, wondering and exploring the revealed motion and motionlessness. Or asking the visible: "what is hidden, what hides itself, what threatens to

60s. Bacon's versions are images of fear and desperation inspired by Diego Velázquez's original painting from 1650.

¹³ Didi-Huberman 2003: 163.

¹⁴ Kekäläinen 2015.

hide in the most infinitesimal creases of this face?”¹⁵ In her dance, this subtle and instantly shaping presence, visible on the face’s gestures and skin, extends to the flesh of the entire body.

3

During the most intense movement sequences of Kekäläinen’s work, diverse textures are rooted in her open body, but in a continuous mutation faster than a gazing eye is capable of capturing. She is able to embody in the same breath — like in a fragment of *Speech & Spectacle* — something that combines a wandering somnambulist, absent-minded skin patting and scratching, some caricatures of aerobic movements, a limping character, unstable trembling on demi-point, a protozoan sensing the floor, uncontrolled bending of the upper body interrupted by a sigh ... and so on. With these rapidly passing ways of being, Kekäläinen builds an inscrutable corporeality, where debate, desire, and combat are in constant contradiction, in a tension of saying and denying.¹⁶

The awakening polyphonic corporeality, its layered and pulsating transformation, doesn’t rely on the amount of motion or on the scale of her movements. In the performance *PRIVATE — Narcissism Remix* (2014), Kekäläinen’s solo-sequence ends with a living and experiential sculpture, accompanied by Debussy’s *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. She stands sideways, naked, with the left side heading to the audience, the body completely bent forward and the head pointing toward the straight legs, while her right arm reaches between the legs toward the left buttock. She remains in this slightly yogic or contortionist position during the entire Debussy composition. The tenacity required in this physically demanding posture is visible in Kekäläinen’s tiny gestures, while the minuscule movements of her diaphragm, lungs and abdomen reflect their dynamism into her entire body. When the freely hanging head searches for a better position, or the right arm reaches a millimeter further in its spiraling route, these minimalistic movements become significant actions.

¹⁵ Didi-Huberman 2003: 104.

¹⁶ The entire chapter is highly influenced by Didi-Huberman’s book *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s History of Art* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).



Speech & Spectacle (2014). Photo: Johanna Tirronen

But apart from Kekäläinen's body, there are other bodies wandering on stage. Depending on the personal history of each spectator, the *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* might be significant because of Debussy or Mallarmé, due to Nijinsky or the bodies of Ancient Greece, maybe because of Jerome Robbins, Thomas Mann, or Chaplin, or even because of Freddie Mercury. Throughout the living sculpture appearing on stage, Kekäläinen's corporeality absorbs into itself — besides its own subtle and abstract presence — the weight of history; the shapes floating around her body are loaded with memory, remembrance, and experience, as an incessant movement between past, present, and future. All these elements merge with Kekäläinen's physical presence, creating a concentration of multiple corporealities on stage.

As a result, Kekäläinen's physicality is astonishingly tangible, but at the same time extremely distant: organic and inorganic, bare corporeality and remote abstraction. Momentarily appearing and disappearing ephemeral movements extend themselves around her like an abstract fabric or an immaterial tissue: like the mythological nymph's fluttering hair or airy clothing that intertwines with her material body, and at once offers a new surface for experience and perception.¹⁷ In the same sense that Loïe Fuller's meters-long moving cloths transformed her terrestrial body into reflection, shadow, and motion, into a shape of a tulip or a butterfly; into an abstract surface for (the observer's) memory, thought, desires, and fears.

Kekäläinen's performances — like the nymphs as well — are an encounter between the inner and the outer world, a place for the terrestrial and the celestial to intermingle. The motion of her dance not only occurs outside the body, but also in-

¹⁷ For more on nymphs see the chapter "Choreography of Intensities: Nymph, Desire, and Inner Conflict": 156-173 in Didi-Huberman's book *The Surviving Image*.

side it; the same experiential presence vibrates both on the surface and under the surface. In this way, the stage is filled with subtle, abstract, and phantasmal movement, where the inner body is one with external space. Kekäläinen converts her stage into a *place* (locus), with a constant flow of a presence filled with experience. A nymph is the incarnation of nature and its phenomena — the incarnation of life itself. When the performances employ sounds of nature, such as water flowing (*Diva Vulva*) or the nightly chirping of cicadas (*PRIVATE — Narcissism remix* and *Hafed Collage of Differences & Fragility*), the space emanates the immaterial sonorous presence of the nymph: the sound of life. A *place* based on experience is as unreachable as the nymph itself, depicted by Giorgio Agamben with the words “an indescribable maiden” (*la ragazza indicibile*).¹⁸ Through Kekäläinen’s body, a subtle motion and fragile presence of life is released into the space, where it resonates with the life in every other present body.

A spectator attended the premiere of the 2017 version of *Hafed Collage of Differences & Fragility* with a service dog. When the performance started, the animal’s grave and agitated breathing filled the profound silence of the space with such a heavy panting, that the personnel of the theater had to take the dog outside. Agamben reminds us of animals’ particular sensitivity toward invisible changes, especially in relation to life and the living. In Greek, the word ‘animal’ comes from *zoon* signifying ‘alive,’ and precisely the same word is the base of an expression describing a god as ‘excellent and forever alive.’ Thus, both gods and animals are ‘alive,’ and therefore able to communicate with each other: the core of both is life.¹⁹ Rilke describes an animal’s way of seeing in a similar manner:

The creature gazes into openness with all
its eyes. But our eyes are
as if they were reversed, and surround it,
everywhere, like barriers against its free passage.
We know what is outside us from the animal’s
face alone: since we already turn
the young child round and make it look
backwards at what is settled, not that openness
that is so deep in the animal’s vision. Free from death.²⁰

A human gaze reaches for forms and logic — to understand the world — while an animal observes the surrounding space as unlimited and wide: it perceives the unreachable depth of the world through an experience. Presence communicates with

¹⁸ For more on the nymph and related mythology, see Giorgio Agamben: *The Unspeakable Girl: The Myth and Mystery of Kore* (London: Seagull Books, 2014).

¹⁹ Idem.

²⁰ Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, tr. by Robert Hunter (Hulogosi Press, 1989) 8th elegy, vv. 1–8.

presence; life resonates with life. The intensity with which the dog perceived the first instants of Kekäläinen's performance was tangibly encompassing and particularly enviable.

An animal's way of being in the world through presence is a challenge. It *is one* with the place, while a human being places himself in front of the world: as a spectator. With her open corporeality Kekäläinen both challenges and invites the audience to an experiential dance, where the gaze turns into presence and looking into perceiving.

4

Whorescope, whorescope
I never knew how to sell myself,
and I never wanted to.
I hope you love me.
Sanna Kekäläinen: *Whorescope* (2017)

Kekäläinen's research on the body's materiality is often based on nakedness — on a vulnerable and honest approach — but in the performance *Whorescope* her way to reveal the body changes radically: her breasts are covered with bandage, and she's wearing light brown underpants. From the beginning of the performance the body's biological signs of gender are erased, hidden under an even and uniform surface.

When the performance proceeds, Kekäläinen scrawls with a marker pen two black spots at the height of her nipples and a couple of trembling lines over her pubic area, concretely drawing new and caricatured signs of gender for her own body. And this simulated body is offered to the audience, placed before the spectator, as the etymology of the word 'prostitute' reveals: its origin in Latin is *pro-statuer*, something set 'before' the eyes, to expose something — for selling. The offered body is re-imagined and re-described, now a spectacle-body shown to the audience. Thus, in *Whorescope*, Kekäläinen no longer is a naked and honest 'herself.' Her biological body is protected from injuring gazes, but also from thoughtful, observing, and open contemplation. To offer and sell her body, Kekäläinen places a second skin before it in order to protect her privacy.

Whoroscope is Samuel Beckett's first poem, where the understanding and interpreting of time through a horoscope is described as an absurd and multi-layered perversion of time. Kekäläinen's version, *Whorescope*, centers on the female body and the way a woman is gazed upon: on the scope as an instrument of looking. Being under a gazing eye creates a paradoxical need, an awkward necessity, to turn everything visible into spectacle, including the transformation of a multifaceted female body into a limited object — and a dancing woman into a beautifully moving figure.

The last scene of *Whorescope* develops along with Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Kekäläinen takes two buckets, one filled with water and one empty, and calmly pours the water several times from one bucket to the other. Putting the buckets on the floor, she then places herself in a crawling position, with her right hand in an empty bucket, and the left inside the one filled with water ("the beginning of life"). She puts a tomato ("a fruit of the earth") in her mouth, and an electric fan placed before her blows air ("oxygen") on her face. Simultaneously a solitary spotlight ("the sun") slowly lights up to illuminate the composition. With her eyes closed, Kekäläinen's body brings together all these symbols of life, turning itself into an instrument of nature, where all life circulates.

But the image also hides an acid sarcasm: the wind caressing Kekäläinen's face turns out to be "the kiss of all foul and sweet air" of Beckett's poem. The composition resembles an elaborated banquet, whose center is a corpse holding a fruit of the earth in its mouth. The main course of this dinner is Kekäläinen, prepared to be served to the guests; to the spectators of the performance. Her body is once more *pro-statuer*, set and exposed for enjoyment, and in this ritual the audience is invited to devour her with their gazes. Her body is the wine and bread of *The Last Supper*, a Eucharistic body, also the symbol of an eternal life, and "So we drink Him and eat Him" as Beckett describes in his poem. But Kekäläinen's simulated body, transformed into a spectacle with a re-drawn caricatured gender, turns out to be "watery Beaune and the stale cubes of Hovis"; a ruined and low-priced product, emptied of all sacredness and beauty.

This final composition of *Whorescope* crystallizes several central elements of Kekäläinen's work. Her body is simultaneously terrestrial and naked, but also penetrated by an abstract and sacred way of being: visible and hidden, under the gaze but intensively connected to an intimate and private corporeality. It is sublime but at the same time shoddy, a work of art but also deformed by the spirit of consumerism. In *Whorescope* Kekäläinen moves between a sacred ritual and a capitalistic prostitution of the body, identical to Beckett's poem's paradoxical "Porca Madonna," materialized in the last scene. She gives an ironic wink of the eye at the entire tradition of representation, particularly at the field of dance, whose relationship to the female body is especially vulnerable to (visual) prostitution.

The knot of paradoxes constructed in *Whorescope*'s last scene swirls around itself once more when *The Goldberg Variations* continue with a recording of Glenn Gould rehearsing Bach's demanding composition. The music is constantly interrupted by mistakes, incorrect notes, and the pianist's comments on his own playing. Still, the sounds transmit an extreme sensitivity and tenderness, a special dedication when touching the keyboard. Gould ceased giving concerts when at the peak of his career, wanting instead of a virtuous musical spectacle to offer an intimate sonorous experience to listeners: music recorded at his home, something *The Goldberg Variations*

are part of as well. When the imperfect but remarkably sensitive music fills the space, Kekäläinen opens her eyes, washes her hands in the bucket, and eats the tomato she has been holding in her mouth. In a fraction of a second, the commodity becomes a consumer, a practical and slightly confused human being, who bathetically picks up her clothes and abandons the stage.

5

The body is our general medium for having a world.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

An open body, penetrated by thought and being, is Kekäläinen's device to construct a world of her own on stage. Although her thinking ironically criticizes patriarchal and capitalistic society, her body also radiates a humble beauty. The *place* emanating fragility and sensitivity that opens on stage isn't always born through visible dancing: "That's not moving, that's *moving*," Beckett reminds us in *Whoroscope*, and this poetry of minimalistic motion is itself a manifesto in a (dance) world that commonly worships virtuosity, endurance, and extreme situations. Thus, in the beginning of her career one of Kekäläinen's aspirations was to be able to forget herself through concentration, to abandon the persona, and in this manner 'become entirely art.'²¹ She desired being capable of opening up the entire body and to make it porous: to *be* a *place* of sensitivity.

It's no coincidence that Kekäläinen's work has a relation to *butoh*.²² In *butoh*, reaching 'the truth' requires primarily the undressing of one's self from the social body — an abandoning of cultural norms and conventions — to reveal the subconscious body, a body where life and death reside. In Kekäläinen's performances the constant dressing and undressing — revealing and covering the body — is part of this contradictory dialectics of constructing and demolishing the body. Thus, her ambiguous corporeality is singular and diverse, objective, unique, but also distant, detached, and alienated.

In this sense, the core of both Kekäläinen's corporeality and that of *butoh* is a living and vulnerable body, aiming to revive a primitive way of being, a kind of primordial energy. It's a body Hijikata called "the body that has not been robbed."²³ In *butoh*, an innumerable amount of historical and cultural shadows hovers inside and

²¹ Kukkonen 2014: 133.

²² Sanna Kekäläinen describes discovering *butoh* as a shocking experience, because of its impact on emotions and thinking. She looked for information about *butoh*, but also wanted to break its forms and patterns, to be able to elaborate it in her own way. Kukkonen 2014: 63.

²³ All background information about *butoh* used in this article is from Sondera Horton Fraleigh, *Dancing Into Darkness: Butoh, Zen, and Japan* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

around this primitive body, shadows whose violent forces make the revealed living body tremble. In Kekäläinen's performances the gradually shaping, phantasmal body agitates the socially constructed body, erases and distances all learned behavior and movement from its flesh, turning it into a condemned Dantesque figure from the infernal worlds.



THE BEAST — A Book in an Orange Tent (2011). Photo: Ella Tommila / KKA

The poetics of butoh arise from the bodies molded and burned by the Second World War's direct violence, revealing its shapes of destruction: a reality that opens abysses of violence. The structural violence of our contemporary society is of an indirect character, but still present in every form of social interaction while it also leaves

behind mutilated and distorted bodies. Kekäläinen's performances materialize this structural violence — as butoh does through “the dance of darkness” — researching and observing humankind through corporeality; on Kekäläinen's stage the darkness turns into dynamiting sarcasm toward neoliberalism.

Hélène Cixous employs the term “a robbed body” in reference to a female body defined and written from the outside — a product of the mechanisms of a patriarchal society.²⁴ In the Western world, the woman's body is often exhibited as a sexualized product of the society of the spectacle: playing the leading role in a construction in which its being only resides in the space a male gaze allows it to occupy. A stolen body is undressed from identity, because its role is to surrender an image of itself into prostitution by being an eye-pleasing and beautiful object. On a 21st century stage, based on a virtual world, the female body plays itself under an evaluating and supervising social gaze. The dogmas of this new Almighty consist of pleasure and consumption, where the control of the body is masked as a service offering.²⁵

Materiality turns political in a society whose mainstream imaginary consists of these transparent and ‘perfect’ bodies, constantly becoming thinner up to a complete disappearance.²⁶ The presence of an organic, unfinished, and vulnerable body in Kekäläinen's art is a statement against the polished bodies in media and advertisements, whose Teflon surfaces resist the impact of time and space. When her body escapes from a univocal understanding, it allows the present to coexist with the past and future, with dreams and fears. At the same time, her ambiguous and momentarily shaping corporeality questions the admiration for a productive, useful, and resistant body; a fascination toward an efficient machine. Her bodily thinking is, thus, a counterattack against the pressure of a capitalistic and virtual world, whose weight falls over every fragile and humane body. By opening this singular, extremely personal but simultaneously universal and shared *place* in society, art can contemplate what humanity in general, and femininity in particular, signify to us.

The center of Sanna Kekäläinen's fleshy corporeality lies in the strength and beauty that made Freud describe hysteria as “a deformation of art”: Kekäläinen creates disturbing images, causing an awakening of disturbing thoughts and sensations in the spectator. At the same time, her subtle research on beauty — its paradoxical way to escape from being discovered, but appear through minuscule gestures —

²⁴ Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (University of Chicago Press, 1976).

²⁵ For more about digital vigilance and its impact on the body, see Grupo Marcuse: *La libertad en coma. Ensayo sobre la identificación electrónica y los motivos para oponerse a ella* (Enclave de libros, 2013).

²⁶ For more about capitalism and commercial environments in relation to the body, see Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (Semiotext(e), 2012).

seems straight out of Francis Bacon's mouth: "I've always wanted and never succeeded in painting the smile."

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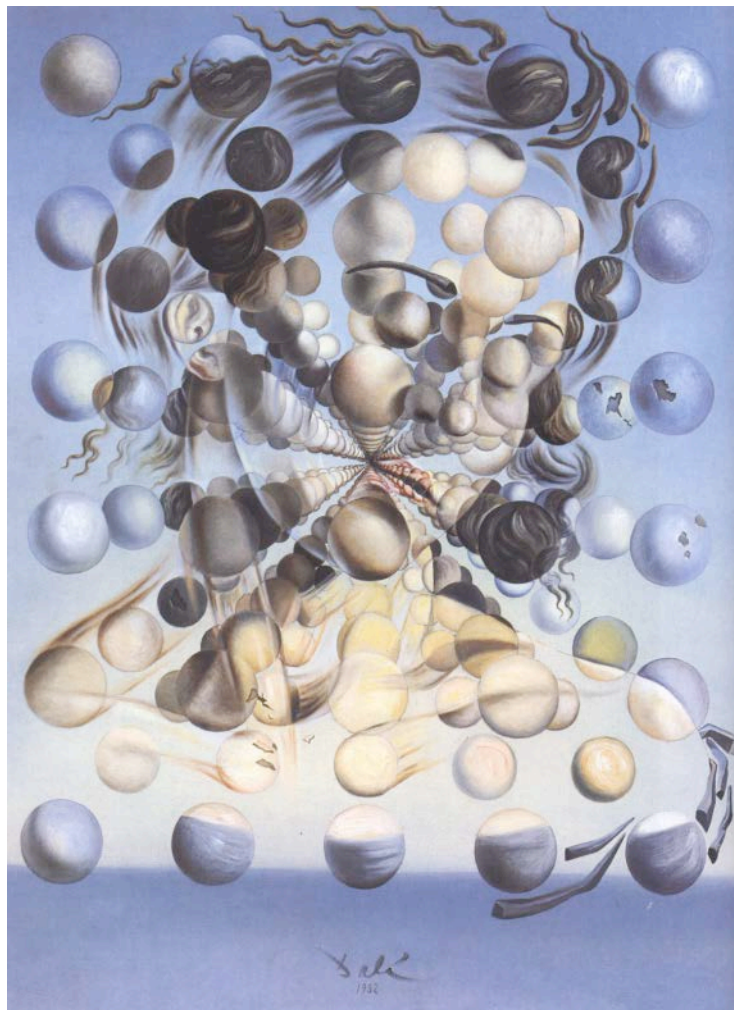
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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

MAURA DEL SERRA



Salvador Dalí, *Galatea of the Spheres* (1952)

SETTE POESIE

Alla Terra

A te come la spugna al corallo nell'acqueo mondo
siamo congiunti, Madre, dall'onda prenatale
che innesta nella foglia la forma della mano,
nella spiga lo scettro
innumerevole per il re Sole,
che fonde nubi ardenti
in ruscelli e sorgenti,
nelle zolle e nel pack spandendo i moti dei cuori...
L'apprendista stregone, il tuo diletto assassino,
gode del privilegio di Caino:
nessuno può toccarlo, aprigli gli occhi piombati
dal sogno di potenza che ti smunge e ti duole,
Gea madre, che ti scuoti
in febbri di veleni e terremoti,
ma preservi in stagioni
di creature invisibili i tuoi mille antichi doni.

Parole dell'amore non amato

In ogni tempo oscuro
che piange con rimasugli di riso,
che ride coi sussulti del pianto,
io nascondo il mio dono, che scolpisce nel fuoco
gli erranti, i supplici, le silenziate,
i disertori della forza, in piedi
sull'asino che vola, e nascondo il mio viso
tra le ali vermiglie, la spada sotto i letti
delle prigioni e degli ospedali,
e lascio nei palazzi d'oro della menzogna
trionfare i fantasmi dei festini.
I chiodi della Croce e la cenere dei roghi
atomici io spargo in tutti i luoghi
celesti ed ipogei, dove il mio regno
è un gioco da bambini, un girotondo
di globi, globuli e mattoncini
che abbracciano il mio abisso senza fondo.

I creditor

deprecazione degli obliqui

Come pagare i debiti con gli angeli
più di montagne tremendi e muti?
Gettando loro mani industrie,
piedi insonni, lacrime dolorose,
o le risate
di vittorie segrete ed ignorate?
O sulla loro soglia esatta deporremo
i fiori della grazia fuggitiva
che noi credemmo eterni
e ricoprirono nei giorni ardenti
la nostra unica torcia o lampadina votiva?
O chiameremo nobili antenati,
discendenti non nati,
animali salvati, oppressi liberati,
per dichiararci franchi e riscattati?
Ma che infine spariscano, gli angeli creditor!
O che donino gli organi celesti
a banche di robot loquaci e consolatori!

È vero

Vere le lacrime versate in sogno,
vero il grido del pesce sulla riva,
veri gli amici ancora sconosciuti
negli anni muti,
e la mano indicibile che scrive sul muro
cose dell'altro mondo,
vero lo zero vuoto, all'infinito fecondo;
vere le stelle spente da milioni di anni
vive nel nostro stagno di buio e di bisogno;
veri gli inganni espulsi dal grembo della mente
per destarsi coscienza. Tutto è vero,
come la ruota
che affonda dove ha scavato il sentiero.

Non c'è tempo

"Non c'è tempo" disse la partoriente,
"mi vola via il bambino."
"Non c'è tempo, salvate la natura"
dissero lo scienziato e il contadino.
"Non c'è tempo" disse il soldato eterno.
"resterò sempre innocente e assassino."
"Non c'è tempo per mettere radici"
disse il seme disperso, "diventerò un granello
di sabbia, un'unghia fossile, una piuma d'uccello."
"Non c'è tempo, qui" dissero le Forme creatrici,
"e mai sogno ci lega. Qui plasmiamo il presente."

Apocalisse

La Solitudine si sentì sola.
L'Acqua ebbe sete, il Cibo fame.
Il Sonno desiderò il sonno eterno.
Il Terrore fuggì rompendo tutti gli specchi.
Il Silenzio si spense bruciando la parola.
E sul pianeta risero Inferno e Disonore.
Ma le astronavi cariche di amanti
fondarono città di stelle fisse.

Bios

Bios la vita, Bia la violenza:
così dice la lingua delle origini nostre.
L'una e non l'altra amiamo; ma come farne senza?
Come scendere in volo dalle giostre
dei devoti della Disperazione?
Come svuotare
il mare della morte col puerile secchiello,
o con cristalli e piume
riedificare altari distrutti dal martello?
Bios, salvaci da Bia:
distruggila col filtro
della tua maga gemella, Armonia:
che non ne resti spettro o incarnazione.

Testamento del poeta

Su zampe d'angelo o piedi di belva,
su astronavi o su barche di pensiero
ritornerò tra voi: avrò profumo di selva
assolata o ronzio di Buco Nero, o latrato
di cucciolo su un prato,
parlerò delle lingue dell'atomo immortale
ed estrarrò cristallo da ogni pietra tombale.
Ritornerò per voi,
cieche vittime o eroi.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

MAURA DEL SERRA

VOCI DEI NESSUNO



da foto segnaletiche di prigionieri ignoti

1) DONNA

La cruna della dignità mi si è rotta nascendo in una miseria sovraffollata. Ho vissuto al nero, al cinque per cento, facendo provini cancellati nelle sabbie mobili dell'oblio. Ma io volevo riaffiorare! Per anni, all'estero, mi sono spacciata per un'attrice nota e le ho usurpato uomini e ville, ma lei mi ha scoperta, denunciata e diffamata. Qui dentro la solitudine è il mio unico infrangibile gioiello.

ECO: — Non è incubo una vita che ha un segreto castello.

2) UOMO

Qui dentro tace chi ebbe la voce dura. La mia pistola ha urlato e seminato vendetta su chi ha corrotto mia figlia; ma la legge ha tuonato più forte in nome di un'altra giustizia. Qui dentro mi avete incenerito il lume del ricordo di lei, che tremava come il riflesso della luna cándida in un pozzo di petrolio.

ECO: — Anche sull'acqua torbida galleggia puro l'olio.

3) DONNA

Quando mi facevo, sapevo tutto, ero scolpita in un diamante immortale, non scarabocchiata nella sabbia senza nome di giorni avviliti. Mi portava via la cresta di un'onda maestosa; ero una farfalla di schiuma infrangibile, un atomo di cristallo prensile e calmo. Ma il mio pusher mi disse “sei diventata brutta”, e rifiutò il mio corpo quando non potei più pagarlo. Avete detto che il colpo mi è partito con intenzione. Ma è stato un sogno. Io non sono la stessa!

ECO: — Anche le rane hanno una principessa.

4) UOMO

Nulla di nuovo mai sotto il sole, se non il minuscolo raggio nella mia cella di avvocato colluso con la mafia. Una cella annerita dalla dimenticanza sprezzante di voi che credete di essere autorizzati a vivere e a giudicare. Ma io uscirò nel codice segreto della notte. Ci sarà luna nuova, e forse mio figlio, che mi ha rinnegato.

ECO: — La speranza sigilla il libro del peccato.

5) DONNA

Conoscevo il male di vivere, di essere un oggetto carnale, un accessorio gradevole in un mondo di gadgets. Non potevo desiderare di avere un'anima, non certo immortale ma almeno decentemente duratura. Entravo sotterranea nel Palazzo, conoscevo i segreti dei potenti; mi usavano, li usavo. La voce dell'onestà ha detto che li ricattavo. Occhio per occhio, dente per dente. Allora perché tenermi qua?

ECO: — La legge troppo antica taglia in due la verità.

6) UOMO

Ascoltatevi bene: chi è in alto diventa ciò che ama, chi è in basso diventa ciò che odia. Voi giudici meschini non avete mai amato, e io non vi odio più. Ho indossato i panni del guru e guaritore solo per dare speranza e luce di salvezza a un mondo condannato. Dunque perché condannarmi? Erano miei, e li ho presi, i beni che mi hanno dato.

ECO: — Non un dolce veleno, ma acqua all'assetato.

7) DONNA

Nel buco di periferia dove sono nata mi dicevano che le serve come me non ce l'hanno, la coscienza. A che serviva per un lavoro da bestia pagato coi rifiuti dei loro pasti? Dopo, quando mi sono vista fiorire nel primo specchietto, la mia carne da motel ha dimenticato il nome tenero che mi dava mia madre. Voi l'avete chiamato adescamento; io ho chiamato la vostra sentenza un'esecuzione capitale del mio futuro. E questo mio capitale di dolore qui ve lo do gratis con tutti gli interessi del rimorso.

ECO: — Il fiore capovolto sul fiume ne sa il corso.

8) UOMO

Sono un orologio guasto, con le lancette pazze che tagliano come bisturi, fisse per sempre sulla mezzanotte. Mi sono dimenticato in un cassetto di quel monolocale; mi ha trovato per caso un lontano parente che mi ha scaricato e attaccato qui, al gancio dello spioncino. Da lì, a volte voi fingete di guardarmi, ma non vedete il mio scheletro di gesso che aspetta in ginocchio la luce per volare sul quadrante celeste.

ECO: — La luce prima spoglia, poi riveste.

9) DONNA

Nell'ospedale dove lavoravo io non mi sosteneva la terra della fede e non profumava certo l'erba della speranza, figuriamoci la luce dell'amore. Perché mi avete condannato e poi dimenticato qui? Me lo chiedevano loro, i pazienti lucidi abbandonati dai parenti e dal mondo produttivo nel reparto geriatria. Me la chiedevano, quell'iniezione, e non tutti piangendo!

ECO: — È provvida sventura anche vivere morendo.

10) UOMO

Voi colti *connoisseurs* eravate indignati dal mio lavoro, che dico, dalla mia vocazione, o se volete dal mio nobile artigianato di falsario d'arte. Mi chiamavate parassita estetico, un cespuglio prolifico ma spinoso e imbarazzante nel sottobosco del più bel giardino umano. Qui dentro sono cancellato sulla tela dell'ombra, ma l'ombra mi protegge dal vostro squallido mercato travestito da ammirazione per i maestri inimitabili. La natura mi ha negato il genio, ma il mio talento lo pagavate senza capirlo. Le mie copie erano un'opera di onesta devozione!

ECO: — L'arte che non si vende è vera religione.

11) DONNA

Portatemi via questo specchio di pena! Non lo voglio, non voglio più rivederci la faccia di mia madre che mi strappa la vita! Me l'ha intossicata, mi ha rubato gli uomini, ha deriso mio padre fino a farlo sentire il grado zero dell'umanità. Sì, l'ho avvelenata, ma dopo, con gli occhi chiusi, lei finalmente sorrideva. Dite che sono uno scandalo anche qui dentro? È perché non vedete quello che sono: una capra espiatoria buttata qui a leccare la ruggine invece del sale sulle mie ferite senza memoria.

ECO: — Una croce di sale non fa obbrobrio alla storia.

12) UOMO

Piaceva a troppi, il mio ragazzo infedele e viziato: li stregava tutti con quegli occhi magici che ho dovuto accecare. Il rimpianto è la malattia del ricordo e il ricordo è la malattia del tempo. Una nobile malattia, sentenziavano i saggi pensatori. Ma chi non è né nobile né saggio, qui dentro non guarisce dall'eros, ma solo da un destino troppo umano.

ECO: — Chi è cieco di dolore ha sottoterra il suo grano.

13) DONNA

Nelle ragazze amavo l'armonia, il centro di gravità della forza creatrice. Mia madre era la mitezza indifesa, mio padre l'orgoglio tirannico. Vivevo sul filo acrobatico di una corda troppo tesa agli estremi, senza consolazione né di memoria né di oblio. Sono fuggita per vivere con quella che credevo la mia donna, la mia pari. Ma quando lei si operò per diventare come mio padre, un controllore occhiuto dei miei voli, io corruppi l'anestesista perché lei non si risvegliasse. Nelle mie vene quell'ago è diventato una perforatrice, e il mio filo di acrobata si è rotto nell'abisso.

ECO: — Come il sesso degli angeli è l'amore da sé scisso.

14) UOMO

Le mie foto erano un sipario dove si dipingevano le mie visioni, che chiamavate porno. Ora qui sono un occhio serrato a forza, che non ha più fantasie né udienza nella storia di voi, probi voyeurs nascosti. Un occhio che col tempo scompare anche dalla cronaca seriale delle morbosità. Sono una lanterna magica caduta dalla sua spirale di delizie proibite, diventata una rete di corpi spaventosi contorti sulle sbarre muffite.

ECO: — Solo quelle innocenti sono le vere vite.

15) DONNA

Questa è la legge del mondo: chi è al di sopra della mischia alza i ponti e si chiude nella sua torre d'oro. Che è al di sotto, affonda nelle cloache urlanti, nelle notti di pietra delle metropoli che girano su se stesse senza fermarsi. Mi ci sono gettata mettendoci la faccia e tutto il resto, in quella mischia insonne. Ero la solita amante del capoclan. L'ho eliminato con un'overdose quando ha cercato di scaricarmi per una stronzetta più curvosa. Perché dimenticarmi qui dentro? Ho solo procurato alla famiglia di amici le sostanze che li facevano sentire potenti.

ECO: — Condanna dei colpevoli è sentirsi innocenti.

16) UOMO

In guerra mi arruolai per sapere che bandiera seguire, perché fuori ero braccato dalle vostre forze dell'ordine, e dentro ero bruciato da quelle del disordine. Il disgusto mi fece disertare e diventare quel che chiamate una spia nemica. Annegai in un fiume di bandiere confuse e stracciate quando avete segregato qui il mio corpo orizzontale per farlo spolpare dai pirañas dell'oblio indifferente.

ECO: — Verticale è la stella che dà pace alla mente.

17) DONNA

Fuori di qui si vive solo finché il pubblico ti dà sostanza di bellezza, di sex-appael, di successo, anche a colpi di gioco sporco e di bisturi estetico. Qui dentro volete farmi sopravvivere dimenticata, farmi portare acqua in un secchio sfondato solo per cancellarmi dalla mia tribù del palcoscenico, dove ho pagato duro per essere la regina, non la divetta delle borgate. Ma quella dilettante mi rubava la scena senza pudore. La mia pistola era una scacciaacani, l'avete vista tutti. Però in quella scena da "Eva contro Eva" mi è partito il fuoco per il suo cuore di cagnetta male ammaestrata. Via, lo sapete com'è il teatro! Forse ha fatto solo finta di morire. Avete controllato se è ancora sulla piazza?

ECO: — Magia nera è la vita scalata in corsa pazza.

18) UOMO

Tra il coro degli applausi complici e i fischi delle calunnie rabbiose sono precipitato giù dalla vetta delle mie vittorie politiche. Corruzione, concussione, reiterata falsificazione, queste furono le vostre rimbombanti parolone. Cari giudici, voi eravate degni solo di altri giudici, come medici che non sanno curare se stessi. Ma attenti, ho ancora dei fedeli nel mio tribunale segreto, anche se mi avete cassato dalle vostre classifiche dei vip, più ballerine del mercurio, e mi avete confinato qui a esplorare nel silenzio il continente della mia sconfitta.

ECO: — Menzogna è alta sui trampoli, onestà è bassa e dritta.

19) DONNA

Prima del matrimonio lui era pazzo di me, mi chiamava la sua magnifica ossessione. Mi sposò per dimenticarmi, per cancellarmi nella macina tritasogni della routine di coppia. Dite che l'ho spinto io giù dalle scale facendogli perdere la vista? Ma l'ho fatto per lui, perché potesse immaginarmi di nuovo com'ero allora, nel fiore dei nostri primi incontri. Ora ci sono io qui, chiusa in un'altra notte smemorata, perché la polizia e i giudici non hanno nessuna immaginazione.

ECO: — Crudeltà spolpa il sogno se è incatenata l'alta ragione.

20) UOMO

Era estate, correvo per le strade della città col sole fra le mani, e lo gettavo come un frutto a tutte le ragazze variopinte. Ma quella che lo raccolse aveva grandi mani d'ombra insaziabile e rapace. Per lei io cambiai cuore, vendetti i beni e l'anima per un oro ben diverso, che estorcevo ai deboli col terrore. Il mio nome luccicò a lungo sui media; scomparve marcito insieme a lei, che mi denunciò per violenza e fuggì portandosi via mio figlio, la mia promessa di luce. Voi mi avete lasciato a regnare su questa gabbia di sommersi! Lo rivotglio a ogni prezzo, il mio grande sole dei vent'anni!

ECO: — Solo la specie umana, fra tutte, ama gli inganni.

21) DONNA

La sventura bruciante di essere sempre stata brutta è diventata con l'età l'inferno confortevole della rassegnazione. Ma sì, è rassicurante non doversi veder sfiorire o sfigurare da bisturi e punturine. Sempre stata invisibile, non ho dovuto diventarlo agli occhi dei signori uomini. Ho venduto loro la bellezza giovane delle altre, le mie quasi-bambine; ho nascosto le mie cicatrici intime sotto i gioielli. Voi fate lo stesso, ma mi avete cancellato qui chiamando il mio reato ruffianeria. Io lo chiamo la mia arte di perdere con stile.

ECO: — Anche il loglio fiorisce tra il grano, e non è vile.

22) UOMO

Io sì che sono un benefattore! Ho fatto ridere anche quegli avvoltoi di poliziotti, quando mi caricavo sulla schiena le vecchiette e gli handicappati per farli attraversare nel traffico; e quando ho scassinato quei caveaux-civetta pieni di diamanti falsi e di soldi fuori corso. Qui i miei topi ammaestrati sono un gran bel pubblico, altro che queste guardie dal cipiglio idiota, che hanno dimenticato anche il mio numero di matricola. Ma io me lo son scordato prima di loro!

ECO: — L'amenò ladro-scout ruba ai governi il lavoro.

23) DONNA

Io? Una ginecologa fecondatrice, una missione sacrosanta: non vendevo sogni ma certezze di maternità ai grembi sterili e delusi. E voi, per qualche ovvio fallimento, avete condannato la mia scienza perché “abusiva, pericolosa e criminosa”, come ai tempi delle streghe! La retta via indicata a colpi di codice penale; duri e senza compassione come manganelli! La vostra giustizia mi ha dimenticato qui dentro, perché anche le sue carte sono false, e non sanno curare le pene segrete della gente.

ECO: — Ogni bilancia è di per sé innocente.

24) UOMO

Molto è dato a pochi e poco è dato a molti. Da ragazzo mi dicevano che per diventare qualcuno dovevo solo essere me stesso. Ma io sapevo di essere un Nessuno; per dimenticarlo usai i metodi più decisivi, e meglio degli altri ominicchi mendicanti di vita. Sono diventato una leggenda metropolitana, media ma solida, fino a quando i giornalisti, i poliziotti e gli onesti non ebbero qualcun altro da mitizzare al nero. Allora mi scaricarono qui dentro per i secoli a venire. Polvere alla polvere ... da sparo!

ECO: — Chi recita la forza soccombe a un peso amaro.

25) DONNA

Dite che i figli illegittimi delle concubine di mio marito li vendevo agli occidentali viziosi o sterili. Ma voi mentite sapendo di mentire! Glieli facevo avere in affidamento ... sottocosto, con discrezione e con eleganza. A volte dimenticavo perfino di riscuotere dai clienti più affezionati, che mi chiamavano Big Mama. E voi, perché non avete il buon senso di farmi uscire da questo buco plebeo, e il buon gusto di stracciare questa mia orrenda foto segnaletica?

ECO: — L'amore, anche malato, non farnetica.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGES BATAILLE BY MARGUERITE DURAS



Alberto Giacometti, *Georges Bataille* (1947)

BATAILLE, FEYDEAU, AND GOD¹

Tr. by Rainer J. Hanshe

¹ Originally published in *The Literary Observer* (1957).

Marguerite Duras' original 1957 biographical note on Georges Bataille, as written for the following interview:

WHO IS GEORGES BATAILLE?

Georges Bataille recently turned 60. A student of the Elève de l'Ecole des Chartes, he entered the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1922: the reading of Nietzsche is, at this time, decisive for him. In 1934, he befriended the Surrealists Michel Leiris, André Masson, and Théodore Fraenkel, then was involved in a fight with the movement (he signed the manifesto "UN CADAVRE" denouncing André Breton). From 1931 to 1935, he was part of an anti-Stalinist group: Le Cercle Communiste Démocratique.

In 1938, he distanced himself from politics to form an essentially antichristian secret society [Acéphale].² During that year, he also initiated himself in yoga techniques. In 1942, suffering from tuberculosis, he moved to Vézelay until 1949. He is appointed Conservator of the Bibliothèque of Carpentras, then, in 1951, that of Orleans. Major works (beside those whose distribution is restricted by an avowed and unavowable censorship): *Inner Experience*, *Guilty*, *L'Abbé C*, *The Accursed Share*, *Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, etc. ... Two works from this series are published: *The Blue of Heaven* (J.-J. Pauvert ; [Penguin]), *Erotism* (Ed. de Minuit ; [City Lights]).

"It could be that the most beautiful contemporary tale had been published in 1941, by an author whose name, Pierre Angelique, remained unknown. It then appeared in 50 copies; 50 again in 1945; today a few more. The title is *Madame Edwarda...*" Maurice Blanchot (N.R.F. July 1956).

— *Perhaps, as is typical, you can tell me what you are working on at this moment?*
— If you want. I am preparing two things: a preface to a new edition of *Guilty*. And a work on *Nietzsche and Communism*, which will be the third volume of *The Accursed Share*.

— *Volume II is Eroticism, which was just published by Éditions Minuit?*
— Yes. *Nietzsche and Communism* will be devoted to the question of sovereignty. To that which we call sovereignty. Nietzsche is, according to me, excusable from a misunderstanding of drifting toward fascism. What justifies Nietzsche's attitude is the search for sovereign value. If we don't see that, if we don't oppose his research to the research of military values, those that we find in the fascist world, Nietzsche is incomprehensible. The sovereignty of man and military valor are opposites. For example, Communism wants to suppress military values and impose the sovereignty of man, that of each man, which it sees as inalienable.

² The papers of Acéphale are now available from Atlas Press: *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, tr. by John Harman & Natasha Lehrer, ed. by Alastair Brotchie & Marina Galletti (2018).

— *Military values have to want sovereignty from their bearers, too. What do you think is the criterion that separates these two sovereignties?*

— It's that military values have a sovereignty that is not genuinely sovereign the instant they have the end of a precise result in mind. If you want, the sovereign attitude is exactly contrary to that of labor. In the work we do to obtain an advantage. A traveling salesman talks in order to sell his goods. But if we have a sovereign attitude we are indifferent to the consequences; we don't worry about anything. Yet the military, the army chief, is in principle seeking a political advantage, is on the side of the traveling salesman. Nietzsche is defined contrarily, by the refusal to serve the reckonings of political benefit. For him, something in human life had the sense of a sovereign end and could not be enslaved by anything.

The Uniform and Servility

— *But the rulers in history have always embodied military value.*

— Yes. A single reserve is possible. Originally, in a fundamental way, sovereignty had to be distinct from military power. The military could allow itself to attribute sovereignty, but it was distinct. In that state of things first there remain many traces. But, ultimately, strength won, it crushed everything, and finally the uniform of the ruler is worn, as if they had to display their servility.

— *According to you sovereignty could not therefore have an external appearance. All the same it wouldn't have an external appearance that would correspond to sovereignty?*

— Why not? That of a cow in a meadow seems to me quite well suited.

— *The sovereignty of the man that Nietzsche seeks coincides then in your mind with those who research Communism?*

— Communism seems to me necessarily to agree with the sovereignty of human life. There can be no principle of Communism that rises above human life. It is however necessary to demonstrate that there is a certain path of Communism that, despite the will of those who take such a path, leads to subordinating the individual to something that transcends and alienates him. I believe that my thoughts on it would shock no Communist without bias.

— *To what subordination do you allude?*

— Often it becomes necessary to give way to production, to the necessary effort to satisfy needs. It is possible in those conditions to transcend what we alienate the individual as in favor of that which he is not. Not least by restricting the satisfaction of his needs. We restrict them in making the necessary effort. I must say that, but I understand first and foremost the difficulties that have led the Communists to take sometimes shocking positions.



Alberto Giacometti, *Georges Bataille*

— *What would be the result, in fact, according to you, of true sovereignty?*

— I think that leads to hardships rather than to privileges. Nietzsche himself sometimes imagined a world become socialist wherein workers could have had more rights and more resources than intellectuals.

— *In an interim period during which access to sovereignty would be easier for intellectuals than for workers?*

— Yes. And even to the limit that one can still imagine that last difference between the worker and the intellectual.

— *Can we say of sovereignty, according to Nietzsche, according to you, that it is an open and endless path?*

— The only thing possible in sovereignty is that the image which we have of a man worthy of the name cannot be limited.

— *What are the paths of this sovereignty though?*

— In this path we immediately find God. But it isn't possible to take account of a god whose existence is above one's own. But God is nevertheless an accurate indication of that which you achieve by yourself. To put oneself in the position of God is the equivalent of torture. Because it supposes that we agree with everything that is, alright, with the worst. Being God is wanting to have the worst. We cannot imagine that the worst could exist if God hadn't wanted it. It is a pleasant idea as you see. And comic. We cannot seriously think about God without being struck by a sense of the comic which is so deep that it would be excusable not to realize that it's comical.

— *You laugh?*

— Yes. If you want, the idea that I'm getting from the presence of God is an idea not only joyful but also analogous to a vaudeville situation, like with Feydeau. Nothing comes to mind in the work of Feydeau that could illustrate this?

— *I am thinking... No... and you?*

— Nothing either. But you know I myself usually pass from representations to concrete things. And besides I can laugh at God without him asking me to play the same tricks as the characters of Feydeau.

The Fool and the Sovereign

— *What is the major obstacle to the search for sovereignty?*

— Undoubtedly the necessity of accepting the existence of others and respecting it completely. On the whole that necessity gives one a feeling of deep satisfaction. Only we can never go against a state of being. Obviously a state of being must never become theoretical. An individual prey to his mood is mad. In short we could say that a madman is the perfect image of the sovereign. But a man who would understand that the sovereignty of a sovereign is madness perceives all the reasons not to let himself become crazy.

— *But we cannot banish the mood of the human soul.*

— Certainly not. If man should not behave madly he must partake of his share of madness. I speak on the part of those who are traditionally from theater and literature. But the mood, again, it must never become theoretical, should never itself lead by example against equality between men.

— *May I continue to pose questions without rhyme or reason?*

— If you want. We continue to play pins for the pleasure of watching the pins fall, without rules. Let's go.

— *By the way, when you write...?*

— The greatest difficulty for me is to not write without rhyme or reason. That is to say that it is difficult for me to write in my fixing a path.

— *Until the moment you realize that in fact what you wrote wasn't at all without rhyme or reason?*

— No. Until the moment when I cannot help but make a book.

— *Does the fact that you started, in 1957, a magazine on eroticism,³ unrelated to any consideration of current affairs, link to a despair in which you hold the current time?*

— Not at all. I made an examination of eroticism because it has a meaning following the radical change which itself was produced for some years now in sexual morality.

— *You see where I'd like to go?*

— Yes. I'm not a man who lives with hope. I never understood how we could ourselves kill through lack of hope. We may be desperate and not think for a moment of killing ourselves. We are not satisfied with hope.

— *What else, for example?*

— To understand. I have never been engaged in political life. What has always mattered to me was to understand. But I had no personal desire. I found the world revolting. But I never happened to find a solution to this revolting world.

— *I thought that at the time of the Popular Front, you glimpsed a way out of this revolting world?*

— It's true that for a very short while I had experienced a political ferment. But very fast I had soon again been overwhelmed by those questions. To be Communist, I would have to place hope in the world. Let's understand: I lack the vocation of those who feel responsible for the world. Up to a point, about the political plan, I claim the irresponsibility of the mad... I'm not so crazy, but I don't take responsibility for the world, in any sense whatsoever.

"I'm not even Communist"

— *Can I write, however, that Communism corresponds for you to the common need?*

— Yes, you can. I consider that the demands of the workers, fundamentally, are such that the bourgeois have nothing to even offer them. But once again, I'm not even a Communist.

— *"Not even"?*

— Since I have no hope in this world and since I live in the present I can take care of that which begins later.

— *You yourself refuse to take care of it on behalf of others?*

— That's it. Once again, I don't feel the vocation.

³ *Genesis*, which was published in June 1953.

— *I apologize for being obliged to ask you to tell me, as far as you like, if in default of personal desire, of vocation, as you say, do you have a general desire?*

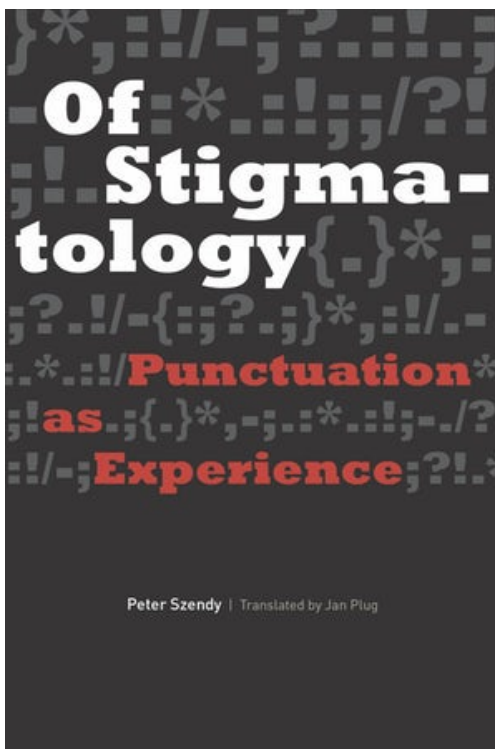
— I think that Communism is part of the order of things, that it is desirable. But the banal expression of my bad thoughts is almost this hope. If you want, I think more or less about the thought of others. That “more or less” coming from someone who is trying express his thoughts accurately can be considered essential.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

Nicholas Birns (New York University)

BOOK REVIEW



Peter Szendy, *Of Stigmatology: Punctuation as Experience*, tr. Jan Plug (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018) ix + 134 pp. ISBN 978-0-8232-7812-1. \$24.

Of Stigmatology is an oddly practical theoretical book. It is devoted to a speculative and erudite defense of something very near-at-hand and material in writing: punctuation. Szendy sees punctuation as not just something mechanical but something ontological, or, better, something which infringes upon and organizes any assertion of ontology in not just writing but music and film.

In his critique of his former idol Wagner, Szendy quotes Nietzsche as singling out the musicologist Hugo Riemann as establishing “the validity of the concept of punctuation for music” (39). One might at first think that Nietzsche would use the concept of punctuation, with its piecemeal marking-out of the potential self-inflation of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. But instead, Nietzsche goes the other way — seeing punctuation as either the symptom or the wellspring of Wagner’s downfall. Punctuation, or phrasing — marking off certain aspects of the music to be played in a certain way — is, according to Nietzsche, histrionic, drawing the music itself, not just the operatic action it accompanies, into theatricality.

But Szendy casts Nietzsche's objection to punctuation as more fundamental, something that would "make all the minor details equally significant — and, thus, in the end, insignificant" (39). Nietzsche thus saw the specter augured by punctuation as an example of the mathematical sublime that would make significance lost in a welter of interchangeable detail.

Szendy is out to champion punctuation. For him, punctuation is not just marks on a page, but the entire practice of points, of meaning accumulating in points, of punctuality, the punctum. Szendy wishes to address Nietzsche's concern about the potentially dreary interchangeability of punctuation by saying that each punctuation mark is animated or subtended by an "overpunctuating jolt" (59) that spotlights writing, film, music, as always interrupted, infused with proliferation and difference. Szendy's sense of language (literary, musical, cinematic), as replete with irregularity and proliferation, interruption and fecundity, is in the vein of Jacques Derrida. Indeed, the book's title is a direct tribute to Derrida's *De la grammatologie*. The difference between stigmatology and grammatology, if any, lies in Szendy's emphasis on the point — the discrete punctuation-mark — as infectious grapheme as compared to interpreting the grapheme as the disruption of discourse itself. And it is here that Nietzsche comes back in, now much more an advocate of proliferating punctuation than an anti-Wagnerian scold of it. Szendy devotes the seventh of his 14 quick, staccato chapters to auscultation, a Latin term which, as he points out — pun intended — is the origin of the French *écouter*, and means "to listen attentively" (44) or even, Szendy later tells us, to listen in on a conversation. Szendy quotes the beginning of Nietzsche's *Twilight of The Idols*, where Nietzsche speaks of wanting to "auscultate the idols." To listen to, to interrogate, even to undermine, all in the same gesture. Szendy continues to quote Nietzsche's image of "this question mark so black" (45) that is the *Umwertung aller Werthe*, the transvaluation of all values. Nietzsche's most radical challenge takes the form of a punctuation mark. Derrida might use this to make Nietzsche's call less radical and more supplementary, but Szendy turns this around to show the disruptive potential of what might appear to be a mere mark on a page. Szendy's vision of textuality as radical is the baseline of the book, and makes even parts of the book, such as the non-alignment between poetry and painting that ekphrasis constitutes, or the graphical elements of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* that go over ground covered before, well worth

reading. Not just Derrida but Friedrich Kittler's *Studies on Medialities* and Darren Wershler's work on the typewriter have demonstrated the importance of graphicality in constructing meaning. But Szendy is writing to re-foreground textuality in the atmosphere of the 2010s where the anti-correlationism of Quentin Meillassoux and the speculative realism associated with Alain Badiou has led Derridean textuality to no longer seem in style. Indeed, Szendy rather frontally attacks Badiou's theory of points for insisting on a yes-or-no decision, whereas he offers an auscultation that is also an "overpunctuation" (98), that lets multiple points run amok. It is important to note that Szendy is not urging punctuation as a measurable point as might occur in the positivism of Nietzsche's contemporary Ernst Mach, nor is he speaking of the analytical standpoint (*Standpunkt*) of Nietzsche's contemporary Franz Brentano. Szendy best illustrates what he thinks punctuation marks, as points, can achieve when he quotes George Gallup's comment that elections declare public opinion, but in-between elections' political polling engages in a "punctuating evaluation" (102) of it. Elections, in other words, are like sentences or paragraphs, whereas political polling is the punctuation without which the opinion that elections codify will no longer resonate. Punctuation lets meaning engage in a continuous *sondage* that will neither congeal into a Wagnerian whole nor be hammered into a Machian specific.

Szendy is not, though, arriving at this as a definite conclusion, but playing with ideas in front of the reader in order to make his discourse as plural as possible. He is not prescriptive about the benefits of punctuation. He is also interestingly, and illustratively, speculative about the origins of punctuation. He reiterates what is usually said about the subject, that it began in the early Hellenistic era with Alexandrian lexicographers such as Aristophanes of Byzantium. But he then adds that Jean Winand has explored Egyptian punctuation marks made in Babylonian texts in the fourteenth-century B.C. Amarna Letters. This observation conducts the idea of punctuation back before manuscript culture and before the alphabet. Punctuation becomes less an auxiliary to a former convenient communication and more a part of what Derrida would call *arche-écriture* (Plug should have translated the French *Acadien* as Akkadian, not Acadian, in order to suggest ancient Mesopotamia, not Nova Scotia).

That punctuation exists before and outside writing supports the discussion of film and music in the book. Punctuation is not just restricted to

alphabetical writing, but also can be used to mark out and instance in film and in music as other forms of visual and aural representation. Szendy shows that there are also audible or visible pauses in those media that register on the audience in a meaningful and disruptive way. Plug concedes that "film explainer" does not render all the aspects of the French *bonimenteur*. But discussion of the aspects of film that showed that magic lantern is in fact a magic lantern, and therefore both exposes and consolidates it is magic, is original and stimulating.

It is interesting to think of Szendy's speculative logic in light of certain late-twentieth century theories of both film and music. Christian Metz's discussion of *trucage*, or special effects, is very different from Szendy's consideration of film explainers in manifest form, but similarly they are effects that lay bare the device and pierce the illusion of seamlessness that the art fosters in at least its less curious viewers. Both *trucage* and film explainers get in the way of visual transparency. Yet they do so in very different ways. *Trucage* shows the hand of the director within the film, leaving the audience to take stock and construct an aesthetic response, whereas film explainers interrupt and orient the film in such a way that the audience either ignores them as filler or is decisively guided by them. The *bonimenteur*, in other words, is kind of the externalization of the *trucage*. In turn, whereas Metz, as theorist of *trucage*, was using the detail to spoil a formalist perfection, Szendy is rather delighting in the reintroduction of form in the wake of a morass of vertiginous disruptions.

Similarly, with respect to music, one thinks of the Stanley Cavell of "Music Discomposed." With his criticism of a purely formalist approach to music, his argument that its rigor made impossible previous modes of improvisation within classical music like cadenzas or figured bass, and his argument that the abstraction of modern music actually was premised on an evolutionary narrative arising out of the more old-fashioned melodic music it jettisoned. Whereas the serialist music of Cavell's day was precise, methodical, and abstract, later musics, especially hip-hop with its conscious use of turntables to punctuate songs, pierced their own fabric, generated, to employ Szendy's term, their own overpunctuating jolt. In other words, whereas postmodernism was concerned with a post-formalist cluttering and compromising of what it perceived as the pretense of a pure art, our era calls forth Szendy's neo-formalism, which in a sense wants to re-codify this

cluttering and compromising as punctuation. Szendy's disruption ends up being a surprisingly constructive one.

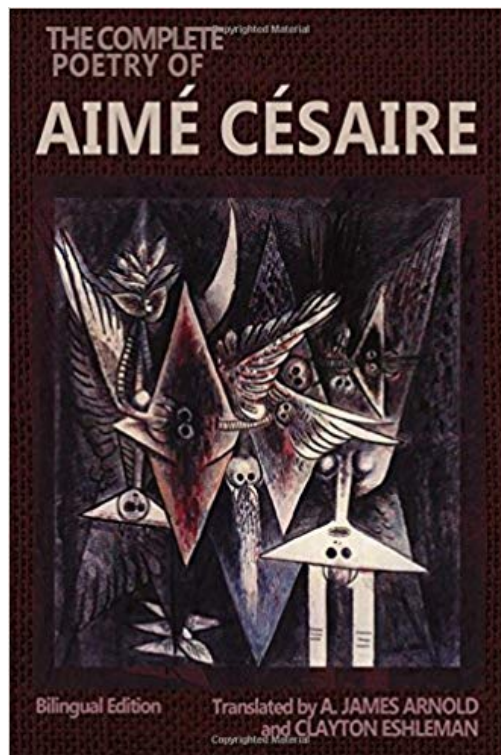
Szendy comments that the subtitle of Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, "How to Philosophize with a Hammer," mimics "the tone of a practical manual" (44). The same can be said of Szendy's book, which is not only written with the winning combination of philosophical depth and lightness of touch that is at play in his two earlier books (on listening and on the political theory of (Melville's) Leviathan) but can be of immense use in 'applied' circumstances. I could even see it assigned in a rhetoric and composition class, albeit an upper-level one, to show that punctuation is not just a matter of following the rules, but is a testimony to the radical, irrepressible specificity that is "a force of resistance against the hold or mastery exercised by a power" (94). Szendy limns punctuation as not an ancillary obligation but a means of achieving the radical imaginative freedom that Nietzsche, whether or not *contra* Wagner, so valued.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

THE COMPLETE POETRY OF AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

A REVIEW BY ALLAN GRAUBARD



Introduction

Consider Aimé Césaire: a black man born in 1913 in a small town in Martinique, then a French colony, whose parents provided well enough for him and his four siblings but in the shadow of rural poverty; a brilliant young student who finally escaped his island home for Paris and the École Normale Supérieure, where he obtained an advanced studies diploma, his thesis on writers of the Harlem Renaissance; a young poet who would quickly evolve to a poet of the first order, and who found his voice, not in exile, but by returning to Martinique, this island which he detested and loved then, and which his extraordinary *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* reveals in

all its poverty, cultural myopia, racial oppression, and lush conflictive beauty; a co-founder of Négritude and anti-colonialist who found in Surrealism a ready staging ground, which he used poignantly and powerfully; an animator in the maturation of black consciousness in the Caribbean, Africa, and South America; a statesman (elected and re-elected mayor of Fort de France for fifty plus years with a seat in the French National Assembly); an axial presence in the transition from French Caribbean colonial possessions to departments in France and the broader struggle for independent statehood in French Africa as elsewhere.

Consider Aimé Césaire: co-founder of Négritude's initial magazine, *L'Étudiant Noir*,¹ during his student days in Paris (1935), and the surrealist *Tropiques*² (1941–1945), after his return to Martinique as a teacher during the Vichy fascist period; author of eight collections of poems, four plays, and decisive critical works, including his 1945 *Poetry and Knowledge*, and his 1955 *Discourse on Colonialism* — the latter apparently quite important for scholars and activists involved in black liberation struggles, from Civil Rights and Black Power to antiwar movements.

Consider Aimé Césaire in his totality, as a man, poet, playwright, critic, teacher, politician, citizen, husband, and father (ever so briefly touched on here) — and then turn to this new volume of his complete poetry, finally translated into English, understanding that at last we have his works as he originally wrote them and as they appear in the French edition of his poems published in 1994. As the translators, A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman, rightly note in their commentary: this original collection reveals the poet in his true scope and depth, without the various edits and alterations he made when a member of the French Communist Party (1945–1956).

It is thus the man entire who speaks to us now through his poetry, and the poetry that speaks of this man, and all he writes about the world he lived in.

¹ *L'Étudiant Noir* was co-founded by Césaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor from Senegal, and Leon Damas from French Guiana. It explored the experience of French speaking black students and peoples under colonialism.

² *Tropiques* was co-founded by Aimé Césaire, his wife Suzanne, and René Menil. Repressed by the authorities in 1943, it published clandestinely until 1945.

The Poetry

Notebook of a Return to the Native Land

In August 1939, a Parisian avant-garde literary magazine, *Volontés*, publishes a long poem in prose and verse by a Martiniquan student recently in Paris. Its author, Aimé Césaire, has just returned to his native island.³

The poem is panoramic and riveting, as much an expression of disgust at what Césaire finds upon his return to Martinique as an embrace of its complexity. This island colony formed by slavery and its repercussions over three centuries cannot continue as it has. Its people must awaken to their history, which roots in Africa, and the racist policies of assimilation by a white French authority that has compromised their identity, as much psychologically as socially. The authentic emancipation of Martiniquan blacks is the only resource that will ensure the reclamation of their unique yet common humanity.

How can it happen? Political and economic rebellion is one route, but certainly incomplete, and its rhetoric abstract and depersonalizing. Before this rhetoric is the concrete human reality that Césaire faces and that his poetry grapples with first hand. As with Whitman, it is this interchange that fuses in the poem, transforming it and the poet at white heat.

He begins the poem, with its 109 stanzas, at ground zero with an infectious refrain, “At the end of the small hours,” noting with the single line of stanza 4 the pressured compass he endures: “the dreadful inanity of our *raison d’être*.” Thereafter, the arc of the poem pulses with descriptions of what and whom he encounters, including himself, as in stanza 49: “I refuse to pass off my puffiness for authentic glory. / And I laugh at my former puerile fantasies” (p. 35) — referring in part to a glorified Africa.

In stanza 52, however, he defines his rebellious freedom as poet divorced from known references: “I am of no nationality recognized by the chancelleries” (p. 37). While several lines further on he draws in raw, real terms an unforgettable portrait of an encounter on a streetcar; the near counterpoint infusing the poem with as much scope, and as true to life, as Césaire is capable of: “one evening on the streetcar facing me, a nigger. / A nigger big as a pogo trying to make himself small on the streetcar bench” (p. 37). Then the focus shifts, magnifying its significance: “He was COMICAL AND UGLY, / COMICAL AND UGLY, for sure / I displayed a big

³ In 1941 it is published in Havana, in Spanish, with a forward by Benjamin Péret and drawings by Wilfredo Lam, just returned to his native Cuba. It is re-published thereafter in numerous editions and languages.

complicitous smile... / My cowardice rediscovered! ... MY heroism, what a farce!" (p. 39).

Césaire, though, is no fool, and however much he takes his people, his town, his culture and history to task, his inspirations — from the Harlem Renaissance, jazz, Pan-Africanism, French symbolists and surrealists, etc. — enable his exaltation of a nobility to come rooted in rhythm, the implicit lyrical rhythm of the poem and the visceral rhythm of dance and ritual, as he notes in stanza 67: "but who yield, seized, to the essence of things / ignorant of surfaces but captivated by the motion of all things / indifferent to conquering, but playing the game of the world/truly the eldest sons of the world!" (p. 45).

Twenty stanzas on, Césaire begins a chant balanced on the bitter, cutting blade of slavery. But through it there quickly emerges an admission of compassion and festivity that, for this reader, holds the character of the poet and the resonance of the poem in its grasp: "I accept... I accept... totally, without reservation..., / my race that no ablution of hyssop mixed with lilies could purify" (p. 51). And the last stanza invites us to dance with an accent that we can easily recognize, simply because it returns through the generations, then as now: "rally to my side my dances / my bad nigger dances..." (p. 59).

From this poem written on the bloody cusp of World War II from his native Martinique, a poet and leader of consequence appears, soon to step onto an international stage.

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In 1941, André Breton is a newly arrived exile in Martinique from France. One afternoon, while searching for a ribbon for his daughter at a Fort de France variety store, he notices a small magazine on the counter: *Tropiques*. Curious, he purchases a copy. As he reads, his astonishment grows. On this small colonial island cast off by the war is a vivacious expression precise to Surrealism. He soon meets the editors. For Breton as for Aimé Césaire, the meeting will invigorate a rapport that survives their differences. *Tropiques* quickly identifies as surrealist, with Breton's collaboration. Breton's essay on Césaire, "A Great Black Poet," which discusses their meeting and its broader significance, after several pages turns to *The Notebook*.... For Breton, this "irreplaceable document" is "nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of our time."⁴

⁴ The essay was first published in *Hemispheres*, Yvan Goll, ed. (Fall/Winter 1943–1944); then, as the preface to the first French-English publication of the poem (Yvan Goll & Lionel Abel, tr., *Brentano's* 1947).

Miraculous Weapons and Solar Throat Slashed

In these two books of poems Césaire's enrichment of contemporary surrealism unfolds. The former is published in 1946; a majority of its 26 poems first appearing in *Tropiques* and other poems in allied surrealist magazines. The latter book is published in 1948 with 72 poems.⁵ As recognition for the brilliance and verve of his work expands, his public life also evolves. In 1945, he runs for the mayoralty of Fort de France on the Communist Party ticket and wins, though he is not yet a party member. He joins the party several months later.⁶

Between the two books similar means and motivations prevail if only [?] reaching full maturation in the latter book. While rooted to the here and now, Césaire exalts the rebellious freedom he has gained as a poet with social consequence. An incantatory, prophetic persona feeds the epiphanic charge of his metaphors. Sexual and erotic energies embrace the tropical landscape and its heated cycles as they reveal to Césaire the woman he loves and, by extension, Martinican women. The African serpent, vegetation and other gods of Egypt and the Near East, magic, Vodou, and Zoroastrianism uproot Christian icons and beliefs. The heavy historical wounds of slavery burn under an anti-colonialist insurrectional horizon. As for literature — it will either follow suite or lose its historical valor.

The *Miraculous Weapons* sets the stage in its first poem, "Gunnery Warning," where Césaire stoically waits "at the edge of the world" for a spiritual and political rebirth in "the brushfire of brotherhood" (p. 67). In "The Thoroughbreds," which follows, Césaire seeks the emergence of "men" free of historical calamity, and finds in himself a vision of man and Earth: "at the backs of his eyes the earth awaited / the stars" (p. 85). In "Have No Mercy for Me," while facing a swamp, he sees it anew as "a viper born from the blond force of /resplendence" (p. 87).; whose poisonous bite is an antidote to a greater poison: racism. "Serpent Sun," the fourth poem in the book, erupts from its first line: "Serpent sun eye bewitching my eye / and the sea verminous with islands crackling in the fingers of flamethrower /roses and my intact thunderstruck body" (p. 89).

⁵ The publication of the complete book here, as originally titled, restores Césaire's cuts and edits, which he made to frame the book as more responsive to political struggles and communist perspectives. In 1961, although having broken with the party five years prior, the re-publication of the book with the title *Cadastre* sustains this redaction; with 27 poems cut entirely and large and small edits to 23 other poems.

⁶ Césaire resigns from the French CP in 1956 in solidarity with Pan-African perspectives and as criticism of its reactionary literary principles.

The poems, however short or long, imbued with dense lyrical deliria, populate a realm quite clearly our own yet brimming with visionary excess. Here is “the wind that is no more now than a pole for gathering the fruits of all / the seasons of the sky” (“Poem for the Dawn,” p. 93); here Césaire notes: “as for me I have nothing to fear / I am before Adam...” (“Visitation,” p. 95); here is “your flour-covered body where mahogany oil pumps the precious / gears of your / tidal eyes / with your crocus sex” (“Bateke,” p. 97); here “male flowers will sleep in coves of mirrors / and even the armor of trilobites / will sink in the half-light of forever” (“Perdition,” p. 99).

The poem from which the title of the book is taken continues the assault with: “The great machete blow of red pleasure full in the face” and its provocative rejoinder: “there was blood and that tree called flamboyant and which never deserves its name more than on the eve of cyclones and of sacked cities...” (p. 95).

Titles to proceeding poems follow apace with their own spice: “The Irredeemable,” “Night Tom-Tom,” “Water Woman,” “Automatic Crystal Set,” which lets us know that “the rain has eaten the sun with chopsticks,” (p. 119). And what of the poem “Conquest of Dawn” where: “We die our deaths in forests of giant eucalyptus coddling the wreckage of / preposterous steamers / in the country where grow / unbreathable drosera” (p. 121).

Throughout is Césaire, suddenly freed from the lethargic poor enmity of living in Martinique as a second-class citizen with a language that he transmutes in a cyclically mythic dance, which returns him to an interpreted Africa yet to realize independence in real time, and his native hope for a post-colonial island.

“The Dogs Were Silent,” a long dramatic poem in the form of an oratorio, concludes the book. Written in high convulsive style, it tells of a rebel who provokes his people to revolt but who is killed. According to the translators, the work associates the main character, “the Rebel,” with Osiris, whom Set murders, and whose body cut into multiple pieces Isis magically revives as Spring revives the wintry land.

Solar Throat Slashed capitalizes on what its predecessor has gained with purpose and velocity, giving new life to Surrealism and French letters. For readers interested in the wider scope of Césaire’s activities, it is also published just before his “Discourse on Colonialism” appears in first draft in a French magazine.⁷

The collection opens with the poem “Magic” as the first line sings: “with a thin slice of sky on a hunk of earth / you beasts hissing into the face of this dead woman” (p. 311). An ever restless, ironic conclusion restates his freedom as poet with the

⁷ The essay was published in 1948 as “Impossible Contact” in *Chemins du monde*. During this period, as the translators note, “the political climate was tense and repression in colonies severe,” including Madagascar and the Setif massacre in Algeria.

“five-branched chancelloress stars” whose “... drops of fallen milk / reinstate a black god ill born of his thunder” (p. 311).

One after the other, the poems transform the history of the black experience in the repressive context of European colonialism and slavery, and as they do so a shared expression of cross-racial commonalities emerges. Leading the way is a heightened sense of immanence (born from Césaire’s vision of political and mythic revolt), his wit, this infectious tropical Caribbean island, his embrace of love as elective affinity, and more.

The third poem in the collection, “Lynch I,” with its matter-of-fact yet startling title, begins with questions as if the poet were caught without exit by the terrifying subject and terrified victim: “Why does spring grab me by the throat? what does it want of me ... I jeer at you spring for flaunting your blind eye and your bad breath. Your debauchery your corrupt kisses...” (p. 315). Who or what is Lynch — a person, plant, place or thing, the poet’s friend, enemy or lover? As he enumerates the multiple beings that the term possesses, it engorges the entirety of the present in which he lives. Lynch and lynchings are everywhere and nowhere; in the mud of a bayou at dusk, on “a black handkerchief atop a pirate ship mast,” as ghost, woman, friend or victim whose “beautiful squirted eye” and “huge mouth” are “mute unless a jerking there spills the delirium of mucus...” (p. 315). Its companion poem, “Lynch II,” placed later in the collection, focuses on the effect of the act with a tearing, tender lament: “eye without shores without memory...” // “with in his nostrils unhopd for flowers / with on his back the youthful flight of the curlew birds of phosphorescence...” (p. 375).

In “Mississippi,” with its racially torqued, terrorist history, Césaire ends the poem defiantly: “Too bad for you men who do not see that you cannot stop me from building / to his fill / egg-headed islands of flagrant sky / under the calm ferocity of the immense geranium of our sun” (p. 337).

A new mythology has begun to form under Césaire’s prescient eyes. After the slaughter and destruction of WWII, the veritable absence of myth — of any myth worth our allegiance — has become a leading conduit for surrealist response. “The Sun’s Knife Stab in the Back of Surprised Cities” thus depicts a composite creature with biblical reference: “And I saw a first animal / it had a crocodile body equine feet a dog’s head but when I looked more / closely in place of buboes were scars left at different times by storms on a/body long subjected to obscure ordeals...” (p. 347).

Inspired by complexities, parallelisms, and inherent song, Césaire’s lyrical gifts flower in “Son of Thunder”; a poem whose subject may refer to his wife, Suzanne, beautifully merged with their island. It is a poem of eight lines that I have never tired of reading. “And without her deigning to seduce the jailers,” it begins, “at her bosom a bouquet of hummingbirds has exfoliated / at her ears buds of atolls have sprouted...” (p. 353).

This expansiveness finds ever-greater reason in an admission “From Millibars of the Storm.” Rising from the barometric pressures exerted by the storms of time and disasters, the poem exists “to liberate the space where bristles the heart of things and the advent of man” (p. 361).

Jockeying back and forth between his foci, weaving them into rare poetic combustions, vegetal entities infuse Césaire’s “Chevelure” with the smell and girth of their interplay: “all the juices rising in the lust of the earth / all the poisons that nocturnal alembics distill in the involucre of the / malvaceae / all the saponarias’ thunder / are like discordant words written by the flaming of the pyres over the / sublime oriflammes of your revolt” (p. 367).

As with its predecessor, *Miraculous Weapons*, the titles of the poems have their own appeal, as they mark out their human and mythic geography: “Transmutation,” “Apotheosis,” “Ex-Voto for a Shipwreck,” “All the Way from Akkad from Elam from Sumer,” “Noon Knives,” “At the Locks of the Void,” “Ode to Guinea,” or “Antipodal Dwelling” — in which poetry is likened to a “Crucible in which is born the world hair humus of the first earth...”

Césaire concludes the book by clarifying the ethical force of the poetic as he knows and lives it with his family, friends, and colleagues in “The Light’s Judgment”: “Over the arc of a circle / in the public movement of shorelines / the flame / is solitary and splendid in its/upright judgment” (p. 475).

Later Works

It will be four years before Césaire publishes another book of poems with four additional books to follow. Each is a compelling testament that readers can encounter as they will.



Lost Body publishes in 1950 with 10 poems and 32 engravings contributed by Picasso in an expensive edition for wealthy collectors.⁸ It advances a vision of Négritude “from the depths of the timeless sky” (p. 479), as Césaire’s opening couplet tells. However, what “body” from the title is “lost” other than the body of language Césaire seeks to revalorize and the language of a body that speaks in gestures exclusive to his space, both intensive (linguistic and physical) and extensive (national and international). “Lost Body,” the fifth poem in the collection, tells us where the body, or parts of it, can be found: Krakatoa, monsoon, cloaca, Zambezi, and the “dark forgiving earth,” from which he, Césaire, “will command the islands to exist” (p. 499).

Ten years later he publishes *Ferraments*; the same year, 1960, when 13 French colonies gain independence. As the translators note, it is this book that “establishes Césaire as the poet of decolonization.” The title, which refers to the iron shackles that slaves wore, belongs to the slave trader’s vocabulary; an overlay with twisted roots that infect Césaire’s present still. Coincident with this book is a subtle change to methodology. He forefronts the charged political context rather than the metaphorical richness and lyricism that have distinguished his work thus far.

Its first poem, “Ferraments,” sets the scene on a slave boat under full sail, which nauseates Césaire. Later poems deal with more intimate, past and current events, collectively experienced. These include: “Hail to Guinea,” on the birth of the new nation; “The Time of Freedom,” responding to the brutal repression of a Leftist Ivorian political movement, published eight days after this event;⁹ “Memorial for Louis Delgres” — the last defender of black freedom in Guadeloupe (killed by Napoleonic forces during the capture of Fort Matouba, May 26, 1802, who reintroduced the slavery that Delgres sought to abolish); and “On the State of the Union,” which speaks of the cruel lynching of 14-year old Emmitt Till in Mississippi in 1955. The last image of the final poem in the book offers a ray of hope but only by confronting what has occurred and does occur, this “outrageous horizon of course/a child will half open the door...” (p. 643).

i, laminaria is published in 1982, an homage to his friend Wilfredo Lam who dies that year, and as a means to collect his poems of the last two decades. Casting back over the struggles he has engaged, the writing done and progress achieved, a moderate, even elegiac tone permeates. Circulating through different poems as an ironic half-shading is the despair and anger he feels, the reified culture and depressed economy he must contend with, and the inbred memory of slavery, both

⁸ In 1986 an English trade version of the book, tr. by Clayton Eshleman & Annette Smith, is published (New York: George Brazillier, Inc.).

⁹ In 1954, the poem appears twice in Russian translation; in a Moscow literary magazine, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, and in a book of ethnography on the people of Africa *Narodni Afriki*.

desultory and enraging. Not one to linger, he memorializes Léon Damas, fellow co-creator of Négritude, and his friend Frantz Fanon, whose philosophy and writings also critically evolved from it. As Césaire notes in the first line of the first poem in the collection: “I inhabit a sacred wound” (p. 653).

Noiria and *Like a Misunderstanding of Salvation* follow, the last published in 1994, both of which contain brilliant, moving poems. His public life continues, though, as mayor, which he finally ends at age 88 in 2001. Four years on the city makes him its first honorary mayor, then he causes a minor scandal when refusing to meet with then French president Sarkozy as protest over a new law recognizing the positive aspects of colonialism. On April 17, 2008, Aimé Césaire dies at age 94. On the steps of the Panthéon in Paris a plaque is set that celebrates him.

The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire is a fundamental work for readers of twentieth century poetry, and those especially interested in the relationships that define a poet’s response to his fraught and bloody time. Aimé Césaire’s passion for fully realized selfhood and the reformation of black identity in the lush, fervent, engaging poetry that we know him for is testament enough to ensure his significance in the 21st century.

*

What in Césaire’s time is different from ours? And what can we learn from this poet who, in defying colonialism, helped to transform that inheritance, *his* inheritance, into a ground from which independent choice and states arose; a chameleon ground, no doubt, but one at least where we can see each other as we see ourselves, and who or what we might become?

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STAN BRAKHAGE was one of the foremost American avant-garde filmmakers. From 1952 till his death in 2003, he made nearly 400 films, ranging in length from a few seconds to several hours. Among his best known film works are *Dog Star Man*, *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, and the hand-painted *Dante Quartet*. His many books on film include *Metaphors on Vision* (republished in 2018 in a new edition by Light Industry and Anthology Film Archives), *Film Biographies*, *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings, 1964–1980*, *Film at Wit's End*, and *Telling Time*.

MAURA DEL SERRA is a poet, playwright, translator, and essayist whose work is highly regarded in Italy and Europe where it has garnered numerous accolades. Following her anthology *Coral* (1994) and the critically acclaimed collections of poetry *L'opera del vento* (2006) and *Tentativi di certezza* (2010), she wrote *Ladder of Oaths*, which contains poems and other texts Del Serra composed between 2010 and 2015.

YASSER ELHIRARY teaches and writes about Arabic, French, and American poetry at Dartmouth College. He is the author of *Pacifist Invasions: Arabic, Translation & the Postfrancophone Lyric*, coeditor of *Critically Mediterranean: Temporalities, Aesthetics & Deployments of a Sea in Crisis*, and guest editor of the special issue of *Expressions maghrébines* on *Cultures du mysticisme*. His writing appears in *PMLA*, *New Literary History*, *Yale French Studies*, *French Forum*, *Parade sauvage*, *Contemporary French Civilization*, *Francosphères*, and in several edited volumes.

JÓZSEF J. FEKETE (b. 1957, Ómoravica, Yugoslavia), literary historian, journalist, writer, teacher. To this day he has published nearly 1500 essays, reviews, and 18 author volumes, featuring in 38 anthologies. At the center of his critical investigations lies the text-world of novelist Miklós Szentkuthy and Hungarian literary works born in foreign-language contexts. His works have to date been translated into Serbian, English, and Polish. He is the recipient of 11 literary awards in Hungary, Serbia, and Romania. He lives in Sombor, Serbia.

ALESSANDRA FRÒSINI is a contemporary art critic and exhibition curator. She writes for art newspapers such as *Artribune*, *Espoarte*, *ArsKey*, *Juliet Art Magazine*, and also edits and reviews catalogues and periodicals. She teaches museology and works as a consultant for trading works of art. The latest most noteworthy collaborations as critic include: *Giorgio De Chirico and Giorgio Morandi. Rays of Light in Italian Modern Art* exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Shanghai, *Polixeni Papapetrou | Between Worlds* exhibition for the Photolux Festival, Biennale Internazionale di Fotografia, Lucca, the double solo exhibitions by Angelo Brescianini and Beatrice Gallori at Aria Art Gallery, Istanbul, and *Alessandro Mendini | Riccardo Dalisi: ROMPETE LE RIGHE!*, exhibition at Andrea Nuovo Home Gallery, Naples.

ALLAN GRAUBARD is a poet, writer, playwright, and literary critic, with works translated in numerous languages. His plays and opera have premiered in the U.S. and EU. In 2020 two books will publish: *Western Terrace* (Exstasis Editions, Victoria, BC) and *Language of Birds*, a collaboration with artist Rik Lina (Anon Editions, NY/Flagstaff). He was editor of and contributing author to the recent *Into the Mylar Chamber: Ira Cohen* (Fulgur, UK, 2019). He reads his works and that of other writers in performance widely, and lives in Manhattan.

RIIKKA LAAKSO is a dramaturge, choreographer, and scholar working between Helsinki and Barcelona. She received her PhD from Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, and has analyzed Sanna Kekäläinen's work in several articles since 2011.

DEJAN LUKIĆ is trained as an anthropologist (PhD, Columbia University, 2007). His research encompasses philosophies of immanence, geo-ontologies, and vital materialism. Consequently, he is interested in ways in which art (and fiction) cross into life. He has published two books and numerous catalogue essays. He is currently writing a manuscript titled "Deranged Vivarium: Variations on Coexistence." He lives between New York City and the Adriatic Islands.

SERGE PEY is a French and Spanish writer, poet, and performance artist. A child of the Spanish Civil War, Pey was born in Toulouse to a working-class family of Catalan refugees. Pey's work is inseparable from his political conscience and focuses on the intersection of poetry and revolution. In 2017, Pey received the Grand Prix de Poesié for *Flamenco* and the Boccace Prize in 2012 for *The Treasures of the Spanish Civil War and Other Tales*. He is also a laureate of the Robert Ganzo Poetry Prize. He now teaches contemporary poetry at the University of Mirai.

FRITZ SENN is the founder of the Zurich James Joyce Foundation, Switzerland, in operation under his leadership since 1985. In addition to numerous articles on Joyce, Joyce / Homer, and translation, his publications include *Joyce's Dislocutions: Essays on Reading as Translation*, ed. John Paul Riquelme (1984); *Nichts gegen Joyce* (1991); *Inductive Scrutinies: Focus on Joyce* (1995), and *Joycean Murmoirs* (2007), both edited by Christine O'Neill; *Ulyssean Close-ups* (2007); *Noch mehr über Joyce: Streiflichter* (2012); and *Portals of Recovery*, eds Erika Mihálycsa and Jolanta Wawrzycka (2017).



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