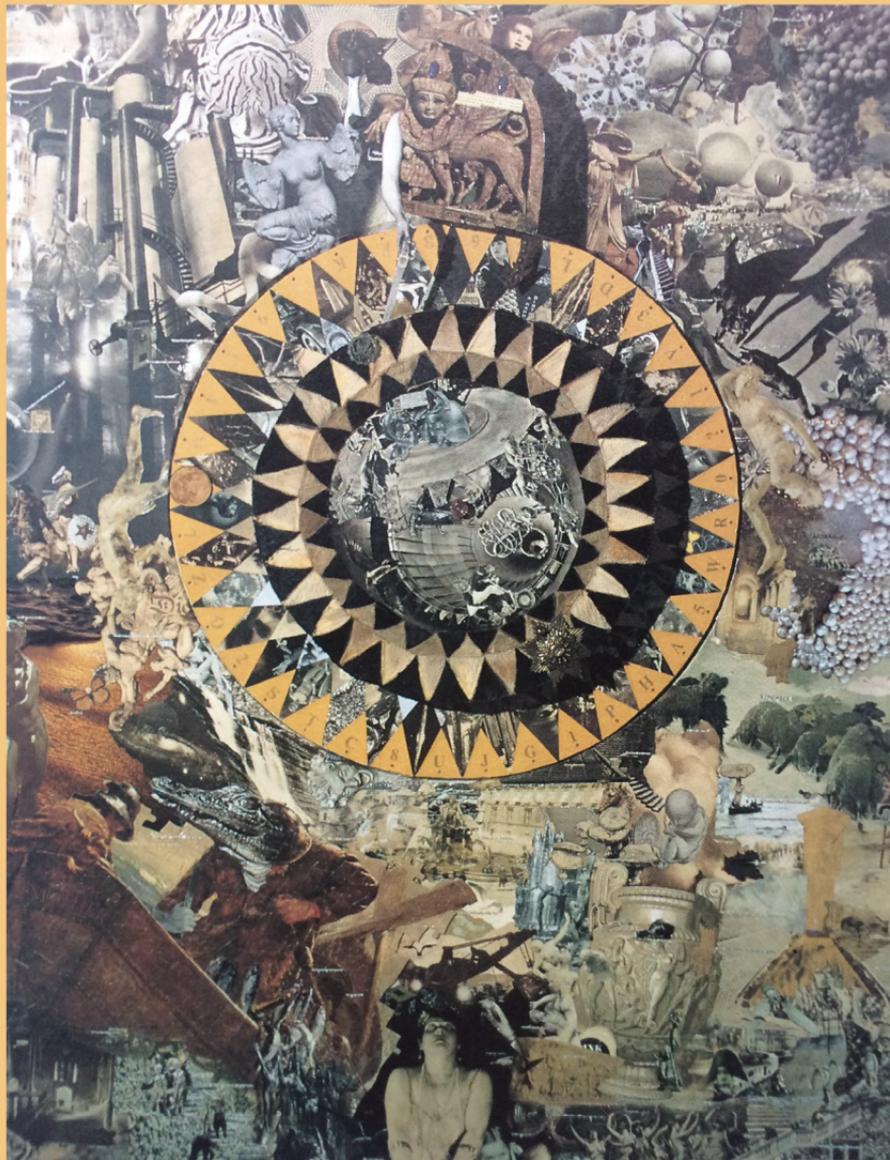


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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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*spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion*



HIC SVNT MONSTRA



P E T E R · V A L E N T E

ESSAYS · ON · THE · PERIPHERIES





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I  
POETS



## Politics and the Personal

### On Tom Savage's *Housing, Preservation, and Development*

I've been thinking a lot about poet Tom Savage's book of poems, *Housing, Preservation, and Development*, published in 1988 by the Cheap Review Press, and the relation between politics and the personal. I was eighteen at the time of its release. I remember, during the eighties, listening to the Smiths on my brother's turntable in the basement of my parents' house in New Jersey, hanging out with friends at the Limelight in New York when the "club kids" dominated the scene, buying records at Bleeker Bobs and Things from England, drinking too much out of high school and writing poems while finding a second home at night on the streets of New York's East Village. I remember the Tomkins Square Riots, the AIDS scare, Kenneth Koch's flamboyant and sometimes witty pontifications, the crack epidemic, the Wall Street crash. Savage's book reads like a report from the front lines.

The poem, "Mayan Update in the Eighties!," is his indictment of America's imperialist tendencies in the eighties which he relates to the primitive and violent character of the Mayans. He writes, "Before it was a one-sided conversation / with rocks and dirt ... Ancient ball games pitted captives / against one another

for their lives. Heads of the losers were the balls ... Blood was the mortar of life." In the eighties there was the Nicaraguan revolution, various terrorist attacks in Beirut, India, and Rome, the invasion of Grenada, the Iran-Iraq war, the hostage crisis, Tiananmen Square protests, Ronald Reagan then Bush, etc. And today, Michael Brown is shot in the street and as a result racial tensions explode in urban communities, the OCCUPY movements spread across the country calling for an end to corporate greed and government lies, unemployment continues to devastate individual lives and families despite the creation of a "millions of jobs," and more than ever there is no hope our government will help the people who pay heavily for its excesses. Savage continues, "Before going to war, for example, / the king punctured his penis / with a stingray spine while the queen / drew a thorn-barbed rope through her tongue ... The name for one king was shield." Just think of the abuses of the military and of the recklessness of our government's involvement in other parts of the world. "Same as it ever was," the song says. In "Unfit to Print" Savage writes of witnessing "three young guys standing / Over a young black boy." "Someone's been shot, 'I heard a Pakistani say." Savage writes, "On the Evening News the incident got 15 seconds / After a five minute story on an ex-cop in Queens." Savage concludes, "Not interesting at all. / No capital gains or losses involved. / Not even a powerful union." Today such an incident becomes major news. Videos concerning the Brown shooting went viral on the internet flooding YouTube channels and sparking controversy and violence in the streets.

Savage remains critical about but open to the possibility of love, of real communication and affection. In "The St. Mark's Baths" he writes of men who are, "Not too old / to be repulsive; not too young / to be conceited" who "know the simple pain of rejection, fear want, know that to be cruel is / to bring cruelty one's way." A Buddhist living on the lower east side, Savage is critical of the ego and a what he sees as conditioned behaviors that block real understanding and communication. His list of what he bluntly calls "Stupid Ideas" include "pumping iron will make me beautiful," "women are inherently better than men" or

“men are inherently better than women,” and “God’s Country.” But at least with these men, who know what cruelty is and the loneliness that comes with age, “some fucking is possible,” and some might even be open “to conversation.” He echoes the Billie Holiday classic in the title of another poem, “Strange Fruit,” whose lyrics, in part, read,

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
 Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze  
 Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees

In the context of Savage’s poem, the lyrics remind this reader of the many violent acts over recent years, often fatal, against homosexuals and lesbians. Just one example: on May 15, 1988 Tommy Lee Trimble and John Lloyd Griffin were harassed for being gay and later shot by Richard Lee Bednarski in Dallas, Texas. Bednarski was convicted of the two murders, but the judge who issued the sentence gave Bednarski only thirty years rather than life. The judge, Jack Hampton, said that he believed these homosexuals would not have been killed if they “hadn’t been cruising the streets” for men. In an article for the *New York Times* published on January 21, 1986, Richard Meislin writes, “Public fear over the spread of AIDS has led to increased discrimination and violence against homosexuals, even as it has created new obstacles to obtaining legal protections, according both to leaders of homosexual groups and to government officials.” Savage begins the poem with a question, “Is sex worth dying for?” When I think of how present in the media the “AIDS Scare” was in the eighties and the almost absolute silence on the subject these days, despite the relatively new phenomenon of “bugchasing”<sup>1</sup> and the fact that men and women are still dying, I think of this poem and also of Derek Jarman’s last film, *Blue*, a personal account of his own battle with AIDS released just four

---

1 “Bugchasing” is a slang term for the practice of pursuing sex with HIV infected individuals in order to contract HIV.

months before his death. Savage writes that the above question is the one that Dan Rather or his “New York relatives / Start talking about” when they consider the “innocent” victims of AIDS. But, he writes, “my three friends who died after many trips / to the St. Marks Baths were just exercising / Their superconstitutional rights” when they “picked up the disease / That may be some germ warfare originally meant for ‘Nam.” America’s moral system places a high price tag on innocence and sexual purity and paints the homosexual as inherently guilty of what amounts to a criminal act because after all who in their right mind would want to risk dying for sex. But, of course, “no governmental body is going to fund the cure / Until it spreads beyond the community of Biblical ‘guilt’ / into the genitals of children” who are, of course, always “considered innocent / Even when they’re manipulative, little brats.” I find Savage’s intelligent and observant remarks on the matter a tonic even today, when sexual orientation is as much a cause for scandal and violence as it has ever been.

Affordable housing is as much a problem today as it was in the eighties hence the title of Savage’s book. Lance Freeman writes, “In 1989, 17% of renters paid more than 50% of their income for rent; in 1999, 20% did. Thus, during the period of the longest economic boom in history scarcely any progress was made in the arena of affordable housing.” My own experiences living in a semi-rent-controlled apartment in the early nineties and working in a bookstore confirm this analysis. I was earning a little over 400 dollars a week and my rent was 800 dollars. In the title poem, Savage writes, “My landlord’s lawyer ... terrifies / his tenants but can’t even force / Us to move from his collapsing / Building full of junkies and dealers.” I lived next to a coke dealer in an adjacent apartment, a heavy drinker upstairs who seemingly beat his girlfriend on a daily basis, and the sound of a booming bass caused the kitchen floor to vibrate every night for almost a year. I often thought that the landlord’s refusal to plaster a large crack on the closet ceiling or to deal with the bed-bug problem that arose suddenly, were attempts to cause me to vacate my apartment so he could charge a higher rent. In an-

other poem, he writes of the plumber who is “not going / to do anything for you or to / your pipes.” I remember my toilet leaked for over six months despite frequent phone calls to the superintendent. The poem continues with Savage’s recounting of his landlord’s threats to burn the building down. In fact, there was once a fire in the apartment above mine that caused the ceiling to partially collapse onto my floor, barely missing the bed. It was during the winter. The building was evacuated, and all the tenants were hauled into a bus that was extremely cold. When the repair was done on my damaged apartment, I was told I could not move back into my former apartment as promised but had to move into a much smaller apartment one floor up because the rent for the now renovated apartment had doubled. After this, my rent increased by twenty-five dollars a year. My yearly raise on the job was twenty-five cents. I lived like that for close to ten years, figuring that soon my paycheck would not be able to pay the rent. But I spent my time, “Hunting others’ old books and stereophonic treasure.” A love of jazz and poetry held me up against the desperate reality. Savage is the one poet I know who understands this life, and, in his poems, he speaks of the problems of affordable housing and other issues regarding urban life and in doing so bridges the gap between poetry and politics. A person’s life *is* political. And I know many poets who have experienced similar problems.

Tom Savage is one of the sanest poets we have. Take these lines from his poem “News Release”: “Democracy and Capitalism are incompatible” or “The revolution happens in the way you treat one another; not in the sweet by-and-by” or “The youngest generation in America has no business talking about what it’s going to do for the working class, poor, and other objects of its “generosity” as long as it takes pleasure in giving orders to fellow workers” or “Professionalism is a pseudo-scientific delusion based on exploitation.” In “From New York: The Spirit of the Nicaraguan Revolution” he talks of the writing life. I think it is an experience many poets share: “When everything around me or inside me / is exploding, I sit down and write this poem,” but, of course, this doesn’t “put the rain on hold,” or “keep past due

bills from coming / To me with flaming hands and, oh, sad eyes / in the mail." But it does help "organize / all of the horrors of my life." His psychologist refers to this as a "coping mechanism" but Savage writes, "I wouldn't call it that" because "Mechanisms are made for the hearts of cars."

A streetwise sensibility runs through these poems, a sensibility little valued, now, when most of the major decisions about who to study or what we should be thinking about in poetry or politics, are made from behind a desk in an institution far removed from the concerns of the real world and not drawn from "facts on the ground" as Charles Olson once put it. David-Baptiste Chirot, in an essay about Amiri Baraka's essay, "Why American Poetry is Boring, Again" writes that for Baraka, in these times, "a poetry of 'the outdoors,'" of the actual, is being eschewed. Instead there is a desire for belonging, safety, all the comforts of Homeland Security." Two years ago, when I was filming, alone and with a small point-and-shoot Canon camera, homeless vets, former drug addicts, and gang members in Jersey and on the Lower East Side, despite considerable risk, I was able to document the language and face of despair and anger otherwise silenced in the media. Certain voices were also silenced due to certain trends of the past thirty years in poetry. That's no surprise, of course, as changing fashions rule in poetics as in clothing.

The publication of Stephen Jonas's *Selected Poems* in 1994 filled a significant gap in our understanding of the so-called "Boston Renaissance" of the late fifties and early sixties by bringing back into print the crucial work of this important poet. More recently, the publication of Harold Norse's selected poems, *I Am Going to Fly through Glass* reprints the work of a once famous poet who should be better known today. Ammiel Alcalay has also shown, in his *Lost and Found* series, the chapbooks he's been publishing for four years now, that it is important to recover the works of the past in order to better understand our present. For Alcalay, context is important and, when this is understood and activated there, is an opening up of possible perspectives and interpretations that counter the official histories of, for example,

the second-generation New York School and the individual poets at the center or on the periphery of St. Marks Church.

My copy of *Housing, Preservation, and Development* is inscribed to the poet Rose Lesniak, “A rose who has no thorns.” Anyone remember her? or Barbara Barg? or Susan Cataldo, or Michael Scholnick or Tom Weigel or Rene Ricard? And if so, ask yourself how well known is their work these days among the younger poets. And what about Tom Savage? He should be better known, but discussions of poetry move hesitantly around politics and have their special agendas with regard to certain movements and poets, with academics, furthermore, often framing arguments from a privileged perspective and not from the level of the street. For Amiri Baraka this is “playing it safe,” “not ‘saying something,’” in order “to protect one’s career,” for example. The danger, he writes, is that this “creates a pervasive dullness, an entropy of the speeds of poetries involved with an actual which includes war, being of it or opposed to it.”

These poets knew and studied with Ted Berrigan and were visible once as part of the second New York School that gathered around the Poetry Project at St. Marks. Perhaps they are lesser known now because they wrote during a time when there were no real publishing venues for “experimental poetry” and no media outlets like Facebook for self-advertisement. There was Public Access Poetry, a program that aired during the late seventies and featured many of these poets reading. But it aired on a small cable station, and it didn’t reach a large number of the intended audience. Pennsound has uploaded the crucial series on its website. There is a poem by Lewis Warsh called “Scenes from the Road” in Harris Schiff’s xeroxed, hand-stapled magazine from the early seventies, “The Harris Review,” that addresses the various roads taken or not taken by poets “on the scene,” facts which might have contributed to their being lesser known:

Some fade off the scene for indefinite periods of time, others stay on it forever... Some live in apartments, others buy or rent houses & farms in the country... Some take good care

of themselves while others lie in bed worrying about their health... Some edit magazines. Some drift off & get into other things... Others just leave it all behind, while still others remain blinded by it all. Almost everyone comes through.

But to think that the poets who fall outside the map of current scholarship, which is often dictated by what books get promoted and reviewed in what magazines or on what websites and the prevailing discourse that absorbs them, is somehow “second rate” is inaccurate and misses the point entirely. Ted Berrigan, writes poet Joel Lewis, “would never put down other poets. ... Even poets that we considered, in our hyper-critical youth-o-scope, to be square and beyond our pale, Ted would firmly insist: ‘Hey, he’s a real poet.’” The process of inclusion and canonization today is revealed, for example, in each new Norton Anthology. The net reaches as far as it can go and other anthologies reach still farther and are more inclusive than Norton and perhaps more accurate in their attempts to encompass the various poetry movements as they attempt to establish a coherent history up to the present, but they don’t, nor can they, reach far enough. It is always a provisional selection. As Alan Davies once put it, “Anthologies are to poets what zoos are to animals.” What is necessary now more than ever is a kind of research and development work because what makes the news is never the entire story or even, in many cases, what is most important. As Jack Spicer once put it, “There are bosses in poetry as well as in the industrial empire.” Witness the large number of presses in recent years that hold contests and charge fees, perhaps justifiably given the nature of the current economy, and yet think of what kinds of poets might be excluded from participating. It is more costly to publish books today, especially books of “experimental poetry,” and there is more risk of financial loss, due to internet sales and the status of the book in the digital age, but the greater cost that is my focus here, involves the marginalization of poets who simply can’t play by these rules, who don’t have the money or the right contacts. When a poet from the

past is “lesser known,” it is simply not economically feasible to reprint their work since there is no assurance it will sell. It is a brave move on the part of those publishers who take the chance anyway despite the dwindling sense of community these days.

Not every poet has an MFA and a position in the academy, however tenuous, and often poets in the past chose other options and travelled different paths, often diverging from the central “scene,” thus are harder to locate in the current debates surrounding poetry and politics. Savage writes, “One more / Potential collectible down the drain. Oh well, / I’ll never be a businessman, anyway.” I don’t have an MFA and am unemployed as I write this, having worked seventeen years in a bookstore that closed unexpectedly. I lost my apartment when the unemployment ran out and relied on friends to help me get back on my feet. Yet what unemployed poet hasn’t had the experience that Savage writes about: “Every time I intend to spend a full day looking for work / I end up writing a poem instead.” And as for his resume Savage tells himself, “You should forget all that stuff about / six years doing nothing but writing / and four years in India!” I am not affiliated with any institution of higher learning, yet I know of poets doing work of real importance in the academy on the level of teaching practices and engagement with students. I don’t believe there was an ideal time for poetry in the remote or recent past, whether that was the sixties, seventies, or eighties. My concern is with context and recuperation. As Savage writes, in “Ophthalmology Gulch,” “A fool sees only today” and

Sloth sees only tomorrow.  
 Death sees only yesterday.  
 Children see only mornings.  
 Adults see only minutes.  
 Fame sees only an hour.  
 Buddha sees only a world-cycle.

I can only second what Bernadette Mayer says in her introduction to the book: “I’ve learned a lot from the writing of Tom

Savage,” from “his constant, detailed observations of people and things, his prolific nature, his art on top of everything.” But as Savage writes in the poem, “Hermitage”:

I met a Burmese monk this morning  
over my coffee and breakfast special.  
He wants to convert Avenue B.  
But there was no one there  
and nothing special  
about being alone  
in the city.

What matters most is the work to be done and that somebody does it despite the risks involved.

In his speech at the Tuli Kupferberg memorial Tom Savage, speaking of the Fugs and the group of poets and writers who call themselves the Unbearables, tells of a remark that Kupferberg made, jokingly, about himself being a “second rate poet.” Whether or not this is true, says Savage, Kupferberg displayed a modesty that is lacking in a community where he feels “many younger poets think they are geniuses.” Finally, he hopes Kupferberg’s “egolessness persists without his body.”

We must explore all types of writing, even the so-called “second rate” writing of “lesser” poets, as the official histories would have it, to establish a real “town council” approach to recuperating the past in order to understand the present in its proper context. History, as Olson once put it, remains “unrelieved.”

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## I Have Heard the Turn of Fortune's Wheel

### On Edouard Roditi's "Cassandra's Dream"

I first encountered Edouard Roditi's work in the early nineties. I remember buying a copy of *Thrice Chosen* at the Strand bookstore in New York City. At the time, I was immersed in Contemporary experimental poetry and Roditi's language seemed alien, of another time and place, with concerns very different from my own. He was a poet no one seemed to read except, I imagined, a small group who viewed his ideas, and indeed his way of life, as still relevant for our embittered times. I came to his work via Surrealism. Roditi was associated with the Surrealist movement in Paris until 1937. He published his translations of Leon Paul Fargue in *Transition* and contributed to French periodicals. He was also a partner in Editions du Sagittaire, that published André Breton's *Surrealist Manifestos* and other works by Crevel, Desnos, and Tzara. He published the first Surrealist manifesto in English, "The New Reality" at Oxford. His book, *The Emperor of Midnight*, which I bought at the same time, was a collection of his surrealist poems, but *Thrice Chosen*, on the other hand, was an entirely different kind of work. The language was precise, direct, concerned with history and religion, and contained, among its poems, a free translation of "a little-known

Hebrew Arthurian romance of the thirteenth century” and a poem which uses elements of a work entitled *Elegy on Destiny*, composed in 1504 by Jeduhah Abravanel, “a Jewish refugee from Spain and Portugal.” Also contained in this book were translations of three Jewish poets, Else Lasker-Schuler, Hugo Sonnenschein, and Alma Johanna Koenig. The overriding theme that connected these poems was the fate of the Jewish people in the wake of the holocaust and the historical implications of Nazism. They were essentially religious poems.

Roditi writes, concerning the subject matter of the poems in *Thrice Chosen*,

Three of my grandparents were Jews, but the fourth, my maternal grandmother, was a Flemish Catholic, so that neither my mother nor I were born Jews according to traditional Jewish law. I chose, however, to be one of the Chosen People, a choice that already implies a kind of double election. Since the most remote antiquity, it has moreover been generally believed by most peoples that those who are subject to certain seizures are also elect in a way, since they are believed to be visited, when their fits occur, by visions that transcend the understanding of other mortals. From birth, I have been prone to such seizures.

Thus, Roditi assumes a persona, based on his genealogy and his physical ailment, and adopts a voice that is alternately prophetic and of a man made to suffer as a result of the precarious nature of historical events. He is both chosen and damned and his view of history is ultimately neither progressive nor optimistic, but stubborn.

The book was released in 1981 but many of the poems date from much earlier and most were written in the late thirties and during the war years. As an American student in Berlin in the thirties, Roditi witnessed the rise of anti-Semitism. Upon resuming his education in England, in addition to the Greek and Latin classics, which he eventually abandoned, he began to study Hebrew and ancient Jewish texts, primarily as an act of cultural

memory. Roditi began his exploration of Jewishness by writing narrative poems based on Old Testament sources as Charles Reznikoff had done in the twenties. The long poem "Cassandra's Dream" is a central poem in *Thrice Chosen*. It is also a poem I have come back to on numerous occasions, spanning more than ten years, because of the relevant message contained therein that I believe is also relevant to these present times.

About "Cassandra's Dream" Roditi writes,

[It] is named after the long dramatic monologue composed in ancient Alexandria by the Greek poet Lycophron, whom Charles James Fox, in the eighteenth century, believed to have been the only Greek poet endowed with the same gift of prophecy as the Hebrew prophets. I began writing it in 1939, when the declaration of World War II occurred while I was still a graduate student in Berkeley. ... "Cassandra's Dream" was ... completed a year later in Kansas City.

The reason for this lapse of a year was that Roditi underwent "some of the most violent seizures of my life" and "had to go into neuropsychiatric treatment." The cause was an intense feeling of doom, "of the end of an era and of the impending Holocaust." Ultimately, he concludes that there was "little positive effect" from this treatment.

He begins the poem by suggesting the relevance of Virgil and Homer and the necessity for transmission of such knowledge that these epics contain:

*Solomon teaches us and tells,  
So that we read it in his writ:  
"No man his wisdom should conceal.  
Rather, this wealth should each reveal  
That all may profit by his wit."  
Wise men of old wove the same spells  
Echoing through the years like bells.  
Homer and Virgil still proclaim  
Truths that will always sound the same.*

Knowledge must be relayed from one generation to the next, maintaining traditional storytelling through oral transmission. Here, Roditi suggests the great folkloric tradition of the Jews, the wealth of knowledge and culture, the wisdom of accumulated years of exile.<sup>1</sup> For the West, Homer and Virgil are the central wellsprings from which the foundation of our culture is born. Consequently, they are both poets of war, of the devastation as well as the emergence of cultures and peoples.

In the next stanza, Roditi examines the transformations these epic poems underwent in the Middle Ages, leading eventually to a forgetting of the lessons they teach:

Old Homer died. His massive Greek  
 Soon sounded dark and strange to men  
 Who spoke a smoother, slicker tongue.  
 Dares retold the tale of Troy  
 In easy prose which Benoit read  
 later in Latin, whence he drew  
 The tale he wrote in rhyming French.  
 He pictured Troy with battlements  
 As in a gothic tapestry  
 Where simpering ladies stood and watched  
 Hector's prowess, a Christian knight's.

... Benoit's tale of Troy  
 Went East with armored men who sought  
 To wrest the Holy Shrine of God  
 From Infidels. They stopped in awe  
 At the Golden Horn, at the golden court  
 of Byzance.

---

1 In *Memories of Our Future*, in an essay entitled "For Edouard Roditi," Ammiel Alcalay speaks of this Jewish tradition. He writes, "all true Sephardi Jews possess unique and private archives where they gather evidence to be brought forth into the light of day at some trial of a nature and date even less pronounceable or specific than Kafka's." He also speaks of folklore as "the accumulated wisdom and honed mastery of generations of artists."

And thus, the stage is set for a confrontation between a “painted Emperor,” “the heir of Rome who now aped God,” and the “Frankish throng.” The Franks behold this Emperor with awe that eventually “[gives] way to greed” and

forgetting

The Cross, their pledge, they now attacked  
Christian Byzance. A Norman knight  
Sat awkward on the august throne,

...

And Benoit's tale was told in French  
To the servile Greeks who had forgotten  
Old Homer's record of their race.

For Roditi, the dissemination of literature has political consequences. This is the reason that translation is so essential in our time for dethroning, in our own country, the primacy of English and for making available a much wider range of languages and cultures. In the poem, the “great forgetting” of the Greeks of the “record of their race” allows a “foreign” element to usurp their kingdom by adoption and transformation, colonization. The fashions of the Middle Ages allowed for the transposition of a Christian world view onto an older, pre-Christian, world. This usurpation of language and worldview was crucial in providing the Franks a basis for conquering the “servile Greeks.” This is the danger of nationalism which Roditi knew well, having witnessed the rise of the Nazis. And it is a recurrent theme in the poems of *Thrice Chosen*.

In the next stanza, Roditi writes of the Greek re-adoption of their work and the consequence of this: “The Tale of Troy, of its courtly knights, / Retold in Greek, soon fanned a flame.” And, furthermore,

Achilles, Digneis, Aeritas,  
Paladins of romance, now roused  
Greek pride and valor. The usurping Frank,  
Throned in Byzance, saw one by one

His provinces revolt,

The usurper shivered on his throne  
When the unfeeling winds of history  
Moaned through his stolen palace, flapped  
Its tapestries like sails at sea.

And so, the Franks are defeated, sent back “beyond Rome and its Pope” to “the Frankish fields.” For Roditi the message is that “The tale of Troy and the tale of Rome / Are told again in a hundred tongues” and

Widowed Hecuba, turned to a hound,  
Has howled her endless anguish through  
The drafty centuries while other queens  
Have wept in turn their murdered sons.  
Cassandra, like the stone-stiff bird  
That sees the snake but cannot move,  
Foresaw the fall of Troy.

This prelude comes to an end as Roditi raises the subjective voice to the prophetic:

Now I  
Have heard the turn of Fortune's wheels  
Which grind when empires reach their peak  
Then downward swoop while others rise.  
Now must I tell, that all may know,  
Though none believe me. Now, behold,  
New Troys are sacked, great empires split,  
And kings less wise than Solomon,  
Less pitiful than Priam, seek  
Refuge in exile where they live  
On borrowed dollars, plot in vain,  
Blind to the moral of this tale.

In the following stanzas of part two, Roditi recounts the atmosphere in Paris, where “history shot / My brother,” and Vienna in the late thirties during the rise of anti-Semitism. It is the beginning of a time when “men fought / For politics as for punk and knew / Not why, nor what they wanted.” Soon “news of the blood / shed in Vienna’s shabby streets / reached my hotel.” He speaks of the change in attitudes between “the Austrian sportsman” and the “Czech.” He writes,

the Austrian sportsmen  
Did not greet, that day, the Czechs at dinner.

Reverse the reel of history  
And stop at last week’s picture  
Of Austrians and Czechs together  
Picknicking loudly on a glacier

Unwind another eighteen years  
Till you find an old news-item  
Jerkily recording victory  
As side by side they storm Przemysl.

The Austrians now say that “Herr Pokorny of Praha, / A petty official ... / Is an agent of Moscow who provides / The workers of the Karl-Marx-Hof / With contraband arms from the Skoda factory.” And “The Socialists / Were defeated and shot.” Then Roditi speaks of a Dr. Daniel, who “alone dares whisper to me, an American, / That this is the end, written clear between the headlines.” For Roditi, history was the great teacher and during this time it conveyed important messages if one could read the signs. In only a week and because of the change in the political arena, where men do not even clearly know what they are fighting for, friendship turns to hatred. Roditi, after writing of his idle life in the countryside, having escaped from the city where a feeling of the coming storm over Europe was palpable, continues:

But why recall all this that means  
So little in history and in my life,  
Where history means more than all my living?

In the following stanzas Roditi remembers “Herry Pokorny” and “Dr. Daniel,” who have become enemies in this life. He will later “tread the long path of remembered evil and good / through three kingdoms of death till I too die. / I shall see them again, in torment or bliss.” In this afterlife, he will thus have knowledge of “why each has deserved his fate.” Death, like history, is a great teacher, the final station on the road of life. Life acquires a meaning only in death. Next Roditi speaks of his travels and meditates on death:

But the year gained ground while I, still wondering,  
Wandered on to Vienna, then to Budapest,  
Meeting in each circle of this hell  
Those who could not yet answer my questions,

Who will answer them later, through bloodless lips,  
When I meet them again beyond the ocean  
Of forgetfulness whose blue waters endow the drinker  
With the gift of forgetting forgetfulness.

This is not the river of Lethe where the dead, upon crossing, forget their previous life. Roditi is speaking of a future time, when those who have survived the present terror and have become like the living dead will speak “through bloodless lips” as they remember and tell their stories. But, presently,

In the Prater, the shrill calliopes played  
Tannhauser and La Tosca to the empty night  
Which still roared like a shell with the shots of revolt  
And the moans of the dying whom none dared moan.

All the waltzes sang of the pre-war past

In the night-clubs where the singers dared not speak  
Their fearful thoughts, but laughed for a meager living  
In a mad city like a hag who remembers her youth.

The illusion of business as usual provides a cover and no one dares moan the dead nor speak. Silence rules and enables the violence to continue, unquestioned. It is an old story that repeats throughout history, of men unable, or indeed unwilling, out of fear or for some other reason, to speak out. The line between complicity or denial and incapacity or fear is blurred. In the last stanza of part two, Roditi speaks of his memory of the past having now travelled West, eventually arriving in New York

To meet my fate there and face the wolf  
That had haunted me five years, awaiting its prey  
As I wandered and shunned the day and the place  
And gained time, a few breaths in eternity.

Life has become a matter of gaining time, staying one step ahead of the pain of memory, to be able to finally catch “a few breaths in eternity.”

Part three begins with an imagined prophecy that some “Merlin of the Daily Mail ... shall make, too late:

Then shall the realm of Albion  
Come to great confusion.  
Then comes the time.

And Roditi imagines that if there were indeed “one / Responsible for past, strictly ruling / The present, / planning future change, / To grant our prayers,

I'd ask  
That each day leave my world unchanged,  
Hopes unfulfilled, but fears untrue,  
No better and no worse. For we  
Have seen the best, await the worst

Which must be worse than any time  
After or before, foretold or remembered.

This is despair tempered by a hesitant optimism. It is a precarious mercy that comes at the expense of hope, for man now awaits unimaginable horror and the poet asks that his world remain unchanged. But the poet is aware that “all things rise and fall, grow ripe / And then decay.” He writes,

And we have seen  
The best of our time, all at its height,  
And now must watch things fall and wait  
For doom and death in poverty.

We have earned more than we deserved,  
Spent what our fathers saved for us,  
And now must pay; have lived by laws  
Which others gained in grim revolts  
From tyrants jealous of their rights;  
Our learning too, we found in books  
Born of past effort, easy for us.

History is not progressive. We measure our own decline by the passage of years. For Roditi, we have squandered what came to us too easily, gained a precarious safety from the efforts of those who fought and died in “grim revolts,” and even our learning is at fault, as we take for granted the words of a book born of the experience of others, words written in blood. Roditi writes,

For the pain of the past and the pain  
Of the future, memory and foresight,  
Are lighter than pangs of the endless present  
In which we live, save in our sleep,  
In hopes, in fears, in poetry  
And in our death, those five sole doors  
Of escape.

Of these five doors only death “allows no return / to the present.” Only in death does one achieve a peace not possible in the present state of the world. For Roditi, death is supreme in its finality and the only certain escape from pain. For all things, no matter how mighty or strong, must fall, “grow ripe / and then decay.” This is the truth of philosophy. And yet, Roditi writes, we think we

are wise, know all the answers.  
 Builders of bridges, of Babel's tower,  
 Of cyclotrons, World Fairs to boost tomorrow's world  
 And help us forget this world where we must die,  
 We have solved the problem of unemployment  
 The democratic way, by electing representatives  
 Of the people to declare war for the people  
 On the people.

And creating the “useless unemployed” who are not dispensed with or maimed “So that all will then have only one hand and two / Men can do one's job for the wage of one.”

Roditi speaks of the poet who “still croaks to the stars from his tower / Built of the ivory teeth of babes / Massacred in the wars which he has survived / Because his gods did not love him enough / And bred him unfit for military service.” This is the world of the *Iliad* where death haunts every action ready to dispense honor or shame. Here the decadent poet in his horrific tower “croaks” uselessly to the heavens, himself complicit with atrocity. One thinks of the ending of Visconti's *Senso*, where having bought his freedom by bribing army doctors in order to keep him away from the battlefield, Franz suffers humiliation as his health declines, and he drowns himself in sex and alcohol. Roditi, like many after him, was critical of the complacency of artists which bordered dangerously on a kind of complicity. In another Visconti film, *The Damned*, Gunther, a sensitive and artistic student, falls under the spell of fascism and becomes an S.S. officer. Roditi continues,

But our planet is perhaps a parachute-trooper  
Dropped in the Universe, behind the lines  
Of eternity, with incendiary bombs to spread  
Terror and confusion in systems of order  
Where all who are whole will soon be studied  
As fossils from a lost age, missing links to prove  
The existence of hypothetical monsters, Trojan  
Horses or Political Termites, both extinct.

The earth itself is like a “parachute-trooper” creating terror and disorder with “incendiary bombs.” The devastation is total behind the “lines of eternity” and man’s fate is “to be “studied / As fossils from a lost age.” From the view of eternity man is insignificant. Roditi seems to be asking: how will man be remembered after the atrocities he has committed? Given the historical facts, he will prove himself the missing link to “hypothetical monsters” as a result of the horror of his acts, “Trojan / Horses or Political Termites, both extinct.”

Roditi then goes on to describe, in his surrealist mode, a scene of aberrant nature:

So let us rejoice that things at least are thorough:  
Charon’s bark, in universal shipwreck, now  
Capsizes too. Its crew of dead  
Is lost and drowned, returned to life  
By vomiting Leviathan to claim  
Compensation from Lloyd’s of London for losing  
The benefits of funeral expenses, prayers  
Which cannot help them rest in peace.

See! Birds now build nests beneath the waves  
And fish sing Tereu in every tree  
And Bosch must paint again, reborn  
A cock-eyed world of beardless babes,  
Since the old order is topsy-turvy in turn.

And yet, as Roditi concludes part three of the poem:

beware of signs. There is no end,  
But an endless change from same to same,  
A change in time and place, no change  
In the whole: no turbot's sing in trees,  
No skylarks nest beneath blue seas.

For Roditi these aberrant signs are illusions. The natural world is essentially unaffected because the whole remains unchanged. On the surface of events we witness "a change in time and place," but in truth there is only a change "from same to same," and the stories of Homer and Virgil are still presently true.

Part four of the poem begins with an invocation to the Creator and further examines the nature of historical truth:

Lord of truth and of lies Who hast made  
All things twain, light and night, man and his mate,  
Let my mind now discern more clearly what is  
From what is not, save me from heresies.

Elsewhere, in *Thrice Chosen*, Roditi speaks of the importance of maintaining strict observance of Jewish Law, and he asks God for the strength to prevent him from heresies. He writes of the importance of the Law in another poem, *Destiny of Israel*:

First the Law and then the Land  
But not the Land without the Law.

Our Law is land enough and more  
Within which we have learned to live:

Our Land, without our Law, becomes  
Exile like any other land.

Thus Roditi, as a chronicler of his time, in the tradition of the great Classical historians, must be concerned that his words are not misunderstood:

I must know, as I write, what each word means

Now to me and hereafter to all who read  
This and all that I write.

He speaks of the danger otherwise:

In Spring, birds sing  
And the ear, tuned to winter's dialectic,  
Hears sound without meaning, pauses to listen  
Like the bird that hears Old Homer's voice,  
The song, but not the tale of Troy.

For Roditi, "No thought, but passions, inform all song." But, though "song is truth," there is no "truth / But shifting thought, fast-beating heart, / Which grow, decay and change and fade / Till death." Death is final, and herein lies the truth. It is here that "stone-stiff thoughtlessness / Outlasts corruption, being's end." This is the central idea of the Classical World. I am also reminded, in this context, of Pasolini's discussion of film editing and death. For him, the final cut – death – determined the meaning of a sequence of frames. And the arc of man's life, by extension, acquires meaning only in death. Roditi writes,

Man is the measure of his works  
That live and die as he,  
Though some live longer when man's soul,  
More vast and incorruptible  
Than weak soul-sack, leaves monuments  
That outlive bones and blood and flesh,  
Brain, nerves, muscle and connecting tissue.

Yet Roditi is aware that the contemporary world has departed from these essential ideas about life and death and finally, "The past, more vast than all we know, / Conceals from us lost tales of Troy, / Old Homer's records that were known / Then lost." Our own history "Recorded incompletely now, / Will dwindle slowly, shrink with age . . . until men know no more / Of us than we now know of Troy." Despite all our attempts to remember, we cannot

escape our fate as false witnesses, our information hopelessly deficient. For Roditi,

Those prophecies alone are true  
 Which tell the fate of every man,  
 Each city, every state in turn,  
 Neglecting that which happens once,  
 Never again, and is remembered  
 Differently by different witnesses.

The prophetic voice speaks not of historical time, the time of memory hampered by forgetfulness, but of a trans-historical space that encompasses the totality of human experience. For the history of witnesses is the history of those who “cheered the winners, despised those who fled,” and Roditi writes, “Lucan knew that gods, like men / Favor the victors, Cato chose the vanquished,” and “Lucan approved his choice / And I agree with Lucan now.” For Roditi, “history and the gods can err / Like man, in whose mind they dwell.” In a sense, history is always written by the conquerors, whose information is based on false witnesses, who are biased, and false records that silence the voices of the conquered. “Reason alone,” Roditi writes, “makes man a god / Though sad, for laughter is man’s lot,” and “Who laughs at man, laughs at himself / In ignorance and vanity / When humble reason bids him weep.” History is fallible and reason proves insufficient to explain the horror that memory recalls, albeit as a witness, whose truth is always provisional because subject to forgetfulness. For the poet, all is vanity and ignorance: Man laughs in order to disguise his pain and thus his words are insincere. Though reason, in despair of ever approaching truth “bids him weep,” he remains deaf and blind to the truth of the poem.

At the beginning of Part five, Roditi assumes the prophet’s voice and soaring as if from above the ravaged battlefield of Europe, pronounces his final judgment:

There is no other end but death:  
 Between death and death, fast or slow,

No choice but self-inflicted.

One is reminded of the poet Paul Celan's tragic end. The poet/prophet continues:

Usurp time's powers, try to cheat  
Chance of its tricks, the end  
Is still the same: death by death's hand  
Or death by your own, guided by death's.

As with man so too with nations:

For nations too, no other end  
But death or madness, which is death,  
Pestilence and poverty in war, no end  
But spoiling and violence and death.

The words of the poem gather in intensity and the controlled hypnotic rhythm of these stanzas accent the words' profound lament: death is the only absolute, the finality that renders meaningless the words of the false witness or the man who places his faith in reason before the truth, "the stone-stiff thoughtlessness" that "outlasts corruption." The poet's "humble reason bid's him weep," and, in doing so, he asks:

How long shall I cry? I will stand  
Upon my watch and set me upon  
The tower and will watch for the violence  
Of the land, the city and all who dwell there.

The poet compares the towers of "Priam's city" with those of Manhattan:

Manhattan, Manhattan, thy towers more lofty  
Than lofty-towered Ilion's must fall as low  
As Priam's city, forgotten and buried  
Beneath seven cities, seals on history's book.

Edouard Roditi did not live to witness the tragedy of 9/11, but if he did, he would have seen his words as indeed prophetic, as I do, reading them now. For Roditi, "history casts down, however lofty / Its victim, no lower than death, / Defeat and oblivion where all are equal / Till the chronicler judges the good, the evil." This is a deeply religious poem but as we have seen and will see, Roditi's God is death, that instills fear in all men. In New York, Roditi "met all those // Who had fled as I fled. Together they sang / In one voice *In exitu Israel ex Egypto*." This other dangerous exodus was from the wreckage of Europe into the grips of fascism. During this time Roditi "fled East" but "in vain." Continuing his classical theme, he writes,

All those who watched aghast the fall  
 Of lofty-towered Iliion, Rome  
 Believed eternal, Byzantium poised  
 Between two continents, each time did think  
 That history now must stop, appeased  
 In pity and fear.

But history will not be appeased. It "Blindly rages on, builds other cities / To pump the blood of sprawling empires" among them London and New York, "More high above the Hudson reared / Than Iliion mirrored in flat Scamander." Roditi concludes, "our ghosts / decoy us all to equal death, / Defeat, decay, where all things meet." Earlier Roditi had written that the true movement of events is from "same to same," so London, New York are as Iliion, Byzantium. History sweeps all from its path in its march toward oblivion.

In the final stanzas of the poem the poet speaks "through lips no longer living / But stiff with sorrow, stony with fear." He is "A dead man in a world dead" speaking to the dead, "not knowing who lives, who hears, / Deaf to my words, shrill twitter of ghosts." He knows "not yet which friends are dead." For the poet, "death's distorting mirror / ... makes such mockery of life." Death is the final stop in life's travels, unavoidable and yet to some an escape, terrible to imagine, and yet it is what defines and gives

meaning to a life lived. As the poem closes, the poet introduces a figure, female, personification of the night and history:

The fringes of the blind night's cloak  
Are matted thick with dust and sweat  
Of other lands and times swept up  
As she staggers round the reeling world.

She stops to whisper in our ears,  
Curled as a shell and always loud  
With echoes of her hoverings,  
Those dreams that are our other lives.

She is also memory, one of the fates, perhaps, "Fresh from the moaning battlefield, / She brings us gentle winds that still / Repeat, caught Absalom-like in trees / The sighs of dying men, the moans / Of prisoners in vast distress." Finally, she is the personification of cultural memory, calling the poet to remember the countless dead. Alternately, "the damned ... she drags to sleep / And hopeless dreams of liberty / Dark manna dropped on prison camps." To the end the poet resists the false hope of liberty, the loss has been too great, the need to remember too urgent. Roditi is stubborn in his vision of history as unremitting, full of rage, without consideration for man, a vengeful God who escapes our feeble attempts at reason. Finally, this figure speaks to the poet:

To me, she brings the fear of God.  
Who else could invent such a spell?  
But God is death and history  
And night that whispers in my ear.

In conclusion, the poet writes,

*The future is the unforeseen.  
Its nature is surprise.  
Like God, it's best defined by thought*

*Which cautiously denies.*

“Cassandra’s Dream” was completed in 1940. From this vantage point, any thought of the future could only take the shape of a denial before the unspeakable, the unthinkable.

In an interview with Bradford Morrow in 1984, Roditi, in response to a question asking which artists will survive in the next century, writes about the reception of *Thrice Chosen*. I have included the response in full because it brings up a number of crucial points:

But then recently, somebody in Paris brought to my attention the last issue of the *American Book Review* which had a panning of my book *Thrice Chosen* (Black Sparrow Press, 1982) together with a panning of Paul Goodman at the same time for his *Preface*. The author of this article described Goodman as an “absolutely dreadful writer” which I found rather camp. And I wrote a letter to the editor, which he must have received this week, pointing out that in his appreciation of my poetry the reviewer quotes a couple of lines and objects to the bathos. And I said, well, bathos is a perfectly legitimate rhetorical trope. Pope used it, Samuel Butler in *Hudibras* used it. ... They’ve missed the point once again because of historical ignorance. What varieties of historical ignorance may afflict unborn generations of readers I couldn’t begin to guess. And as for Goodman being a perfectly dreadful writer, Thomas Paine was considered dreadful in his day, George Washington couldn’t stand Philip Freneau, whom we should respect as the first American writer to have defended the rights of Blacks and the Indians. Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman were all considered dreadful writers by most of their contemporaries. But we read them and why do we read them? Because they make us think. Paul Goodman makes us think. Goodman may not write as perfectly as the author of this review, but America has always had a plethora of perfect writers. Great writers there is always a shortage of; great writers can have their faults.

The reviewer says he witnessed instances of what he objects to as “bathos” and what Goodman, on the other hand, calls in his introduction Roditi’s “dry wit.” Nevertheless, Roditi defends his position saying that it is “a perfectly legitimate rhetorical trope.” “Cassandra’s Dream” contains meditations on the nature of life and death, where Roditi adopts a highly exalted, prophetic tone, and there are other passages that are examples of his surrealism and dry wit. In Roditi’s comment on the reviewer’s question he also notes George Washington’s rejection of Philip Freneau, the “poet of the American Revolution.” Freneau recorded his hatred of the cruelties of West Indian slavery in verse. In his poem, “To Sir Toby, a Sugar-Planter in the interior parts of Jamaica,” he writes, “If there exists a HELL — the case is clear — / Sir Toby’s slaves enjoy that portion here.” Finally, Roditi notes that it is because of “historical ignorance” that the reviewer “missed the point” of his book. Politics and poetry, in these times, seem to be at opposite poles of the prevailing discourses. Furthermore, the reviewer seems to be unaffected by the use of the prophetic tone and the deeply moving effect thus created. In this poem, as in others in this book, Roditi is adopting various voices inspired by, in the case of “Cassandra’s Dream,” a dramatic monologue by the Greek poet Lycophron. In another poem, he uses various quotations from the King James Old Testament to create a kind of collage.

Amriel Alcalay, in his essay, “For Edouard Roditi,” writes of their mutual assumption “that people — any people — can only anticipate and envision a future according to how the past is represented and transmitted.” He mentions a proposed project that was rejected by an academic publisher and left uncompleted at the time of Roditi’s death. He writes,

If our suppositions were to be accepted, then contemporary Israeli culture and literature, for example, would have to be studied in its wider Middle Eastern context. Many of the fictions we have come to accept as fact, in the face of overwhelming textual and historical evidence testifying to

contrary or contradictory experiences, would simply have to be dispensed with. All of these issues were close to Edouard's truly pluri-cultural experience and way of looking at the world.<sup>2</sup>

And Paul Goodman, in the introduction to *Thrice Chosen*, writes

No matter how badly off [Roditi] is and no matter how impossible the circumstances of the world, he continuously and unfalteringly proves that it is still possible to be an urbane and compassionate man, who does not avoid the suffering and does not blink at the facts, but who can nevertheless find some truth and beauty there.

In "Cassandra's Dream," Roditi impels us, despite the finality of death and the limits of reason, despite also, the fear of God and the devastations of history, to examine the representations of the past as an act of cultural memory because "the future is unseen," and in doing so we can hope to change the terms of the prevailing discourse that surrounds the Holocaust.

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<sup>2</sup> Ammiel Alcalay, "For Eduard Roditi," in *Memories of Our Future* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), 63.



## I Surrender to the Seraphim

### On Neeli Cherkovski's *The Crow and I*

Neeli Cherkovski is a master of his craft and this new volume of poetry, *The Crow and I*, is further evidence of his unconventional wisdom and the depth of his lyrical sense. These poems are concerned with two of our most fundamental themes, Eros and Thanatos. The love poems are complex and emotionally charged, as they recount a lifetime of loving and loss. Other poems deal with the issues that come up when you grow older and face the inevitability of death, but Cherkovski does not practice a quiet resignation. Rather, I can imagine him raging against the dying of the light. Cherkovski is not concerned with the afterlife nor with the biblical God but, with this idea of Oblivion, the total annihilation of the world. That is more frightening than any idea of heaven or hell. But at seventy years old, and whatever the future may hold, Cherkovski is ready to meet it head on. He's at the height of his powers, and more prolific than ever. Almost daily he posts astonishing new poems on Facebook. He is honest with himself and the poems are never merely flaunting technique, like so much contemporary "experimental" poetry. His is a poetry that believes in the power of the lyrical self: "the idea is to fabricate nothing / to sing as men have always sung." His poetry is the real thing.

In *The Crow and I* there are a number of striking love poems and here he is the equal of John Wieners. For example, there is the very moving poem to his longtime friend, the poet Harold Norse, "Hydra Waterfront," where he writes,

I miss you more than I miss  
 you, I guess it is a feeling without  
 measure, you were the man  
 who showed me at least one way  
 out of the solitude and back to the self

Indeed, if one were to speak of Cherkovski's poetics, one would have to mention his belief in an authentic self, apart from social convention and repression. In a poem, not included here, he writes, "Legislate no morality dear animal-body." His friendship with Norse was important in this respect since he showed the young Cherkovski that gay sex could be experienced without shame but rather with joy and ecstasy. That permission was what the young Cherkovski needed to strip away the false trappings of identity and embrace his sexual body.

In "I'll undress him..." Cherkovski writes,

I only wish  
 to undress him with a smile and  
 a tear, to say "How lovely  
 your shoulders, so slim your arms ...

And concludes that "it is good to play around / desire's realm." In "Save Me from the People," Cherkovski writes, "I talk to the tall young men in well-laundered Levis ... do they know how I undress them, calmly unbuttoning / a shirt, slowly kissing curly black hair of the groin ... let me be a fantasy." Indeed, erotic fantasy can yield a moment of intense pleasure but there is always the wish to be desired in return.

In "Eros, Flowers" Cherkovski recounts his love for a young, talented, poet, Eric Walker. In this poem, he is more candid:

yes I turned you over  
 to one side and felt you  
 deep in my mouth, then a stream  
 of come all over my heart  
 the veins of your eyes  
 came rushing along the side  
 of my room, four walls rocking  
 into the night, my bed soaked  
 with your courage, flowers struggling  
 toward emancipation

Later on in the poem, Cherkovski tells of the fate that befell this young, talented poet. He falls for a girl who “couldn’t have” him, was given drugs, thrown in jail, and committed suicide while incarcerated. He was only twenty-nine years old. It is a sad fact that many gay men commit suicide because of rejection from their parents or friends, or attempt to enter into heterosexual relationships that end up failing, or are medicated for depression, etc. They are the casualties of an intolerant and ignorant society. This reader is also reminded of the lives that were lost in the struggle for gay rights and how much more needs to be done “in the struggle for emancipation.”

Another complicated affair is suggested in the poem, “Pandemonium.” Neeli writes, “right here the trouble began, you are in bed / beside me and I’m trying to forget and forgive / nothing, let me go far enough away.” Love and especially sexual tension can breed fear or lead to resentment. Nevertheless, desire will not back down and the hope for love persists, gnawing at the throat. He writes, “I wish you were here in my arms / one night, only one night, as the innocents / and the whores, the murderers and the betrayed come round the corner and march / across the piazza.” But then there’s the one who got away: “the day I met you / is the day I adored you and / held you in my arms and lost you / out of foolishness.” He recounts his first meeting with this young poet:

it’s the day I find you reading Rimbaud

at a table in Café Malvina, Franco  
 tops-off my cappuccino  
 with a sprinkle of cocoa, I  
 owe so much to the gods, thinking  
 back, we sleep arm in arm  
 the one true god a dream

But what is perfection? Who needs it. The one perfect lover, the “handsome soulmate” seems eternally out of reach. Movies and magazines present an ideal image impossible to attain. But one can dream! And after all, look how far we willing to go, the dangers we face, for the sake of meeting our true love; it can’t be helped when one is overcome by desire. Cherkovski writes,

I’d as soon follow you  
 to the highest rock or  
 take the train  
 to where Icarus  
 fell out of the sky

And yet, “where has the young / genius gone? / what became of my handsome / soul mate?” Perhaps it’s true in the end that only fools rush in, at least most of the time.

There is also a different kind of love that Cherkovski shows to the dying poet, Eugene Ruggles, a friend, in the poem, “Prayer 3”: “I speak for this lonesome man / who dies bitter / in his hotel room ... he wants me to care / because he cannot.” Here is a kind of love toward someone who is entirely, and not necessarily by his own choice, dependent on him. It is a dependency born of need not desire, circumstance not pleasure.

In these series of poems, Cherkovski shows us the many ways love enters our lives. In the absence of physical consummation there is always the reprieve of erotic fantasy, rejection does not stop the lover from wishing his love to be returned, there is the tragic element that suddenly intrudes upon a love affair, and, finally, there is love that is based on dependency. But “all is fine, grace inspires / my garden is clean and orderly / a miniature

paradise // 29 years with the same man / loving his mind, counting his steps / at night on the steep stairs." And when times get tough, Cherkovski's advice is to just sit back and let your mind wander, listen to the music of the spheres! It's a way of keeping anger at bay.

The other major theme, in *The Crow and I*, concerns aging and death. But you'll find no quiet resignation here:

so time is a jackass after all  
and men go down  
every one of them finally  
swilling beer  
drinking cognac

I guess the world is not  
a playful place

Erotic memories come rushing into Cherkovski's mind, prompted by the poem. He remembers the "World War veterans" teaching his classes, reading "William Cullen Bryant" and then the erotic experience of showering together with his classmates, their "naked asses" perfectly in place. Here is the memory of the ideal youth so favored by the ancient Greeks. But he is older now, a "senior." And yet with age comes experience; he's "been around awhile" and it's "okay to faceforward." New books are on the horizon, he'll give readings in "Innsbruck," sleep at his "friend's house in Tuscany" and enjoy a cup of coffee in the morning as he watches the sun rise over "Carrara's marble hills." Life goes on. These lines are from a poem called, "Thoughts at 67." The first poem in the book is called "Nearing 69." There he writes

69 chances  
to be a wise old man  
like Zarathustra  
and after 69  
a deluge of sea water

over my chest  
a sprinkle of stars

a hummingbird hovers

Not wisdom as such, but rather a lyrical moment where nature actually seems to delight in the poet's body. This experience is for Cherkovski a source of knowledge. It is an erotic moment of flight and song; the hummingbird hovers above him as a sign.

There is also humor in these poems about aging. With age comes the inevitable correctives in the form of a pill that a doctor proscribes for one reason or another, whether for pain or depression or simply fear of "old age, sickness, disability." So Cherkovski writes "In Praise of my Happy Pill": "I'm on a new mind-blowing medicine / 50 milligrams a day / covering my body in a certain subtle beauty." The "pill made things easier / for those I know and for the man / I live with, I still wonder about mortality / but in a new and more enjoyable way." But of course, "things will never be perfect."

Then, with old age, comes the time to take stock of one's achievements, to look back on what one has done, to search, as Cherkovski's puts it, "in the mud and dust" of the past. He writes,

ruthless I am when digging  
into my papers  
looking for a sign of genius  
or relief from the plan I have  
to lie down in a soft bed  
head resting on pillows

The poet is restless, taking stock, searching for answers, resisting the lure to forget everything and go to sleep. It is important to remember these "magazines / filled with what had been / glamorous news, here's a pile / of photographs, everyone is / dead, pots and pans, old trombones / useless piano scores / empty promises." They are "notes from a dead city ... filled with im-

agination.” But there is no turning back. The scene has changed. That now mythical San Francisco, once a “city of poets,” is just a memory. A new breed has taken over. They attend the symphony gala,

as the vulnerable sink, as many go hungry  
 in a grid of wealth, in a town of banks  
 and commerce

These lines are from a poem called, “Eviction: One More Beautiful Day.” The rich turn their eyes away from the poor, who are the most vulnerable in this country of vast wealth. It’s as if they don’t exist. The plain fact is that countless people are getting evicted from their apartments because they can’t pay the high prices that landlords are demanding. Small businesses are also being swallowed by big businesses. How many empty stores line the main streets of U.S. cities?

Another poem that critiques contemporary society, which like the previous poem shows Cherkovski’s connection to Pasolini, is “False Blood.” It is a subtle critique of the typical modern couple: “She earned her MFA in Post-Traumatic Studies / and settled in San Francisco taking a job / as a classical pianist”; her boyfriend is “six feet five inches tall and gets on / the Google bus early in the morning after shaving / and admiring his naked torso,” goes to the gym to work out in the evening, then to the wine shop; “he thinks his boss is a dick, he watches a guy stand up in / the aisle and rub the crack of his ass.” There is the suggestion here of repressed tendencies on his part and boredom on hers. But they are, “mostly white / under twenty-nine, well educated,” etc. What is the truth behind well-educated, white, professionals who perform the same actions every day without fail, maintaining a veneer of respectability. What hides in their closets? Because

elsewhere in the world the cleansing continues, the  
 trafficking of everything goes on ...

empty your arms, throw the trash  
into the proper bin  
brush your brain, crush the clock

It's as if there is a great cleansing of anyone who is different, as if those in power want everyone to look the same, think the same thoughts, and practice the same morality. Cherkovski advises a liberation from this form of life that stifles the spirit of most Americans: sort out your baggage, start thinking about what matters, forget about the passage of time, live in the moment.

In the poem, "At the Caffè Trieste," Cherkovski muses on the old days when there was energy and excitement at the famous café, where the poets hung out, an energy that today simply doesn't exist. He likens these poets who genuinely took risks to Mozart and Bach, "all those long hours / composing music for an ungrateful mob ..."

that's how it is, I awaken in a fever  
every night fearful of losing it  
and falling with no help in sight ...

it's all I've got now, this Golden Age

The original Caffè Trieste was located in San Francisco's North Beach and became popular among the neighborhood's primarily Italian residents. It was opened in 1956 by Giovanni Giotta, who emigrated to the United States from the small fishing town of Rovigno D'Istria, Italy, presently a part of Croatia. It is a mythical place where many poets once gathered and talked and drank and hatched out plans for living and writing. It was the place where Beat Movement writers gathered, such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Bob Kaufman, Gregory Corso, Michael McClure, and Neeli himself, who arrived in San Francisco in late 1974, renewing his friendship with Jack Hirschman, the former Poet Laureate of San Francisco. At the time, he was a poet immersed in the work of Bukowski, but

his work has moved on from that early preoccupation. Cherkovski has developed into a lyrical poet whose work is very different from Bukowski's. The Caffé Trieste still exists and is still a gathering place for poets but lacks the intensity that filled the air at the original location. Cherkovski, speaking about the magic of that fabled place, says,

you'll find it  
 when you want it, maybe  
 and maybe not, in a proper  
 season, in this new age  
 of splendor on a crowded  
 planet

The magic is present, always was, you just have to know how to look for it. Maybe you'll find it, maybe you won't.

Then there is the central poem from which the title of the book was taken, "When the Crow and I are Alone," an important poem on the idea of redemption. The crow has many associations in Greek and Roman mythology as well as in the Islamic world. During the Middle Ages, the crow was thought to live an abnormally long life. The crows were also thought to be monogamous throughout their long lives. They were also harbingers of the future and it was thought that the sight of one signified the potential for rainfall or the threat of ambush. Crows have also demonstrated the ability to distinguish individual humans by recognizing facial features. But they frequently cause damage to crops and property, spread trash, and transfer disease. The crow is dual, it is a destroyer and yet it was also thought to be a beneficial omen. Both love and old age can also function in a dual manner. Love can cause elation or despair, old age can be a "golden" period or a time of crippling regret. In the poem, Cherkovski concludes that the crow is "beautiful / and primitive / just as we are, primal / and dangerous, heading forever toward disaster." Life can be treacherous no matter who we are or what we do. But Cherkovski reminds us that "people must understand / what is important in life / friendship is important /

I offer mine / a man a bird / feathers and ceremonial song.” And there is a profound connection between the speaker and the crow:

when the crow and I are alone  
life is much easier  
I scream the crow caws  
I rage and the crow ruffles his feathers

In an interview with Michael Limnios, Cherkovski responds in part to the question, “What experiences in your life make you a good writer and poet?” that “I want to fly like the birds, to soar as they do, to look down on ridges and plains as they can.” But man is not a bird and so he can only “sit in an airplane seat, pace the aisles, and peer at clouds or land or ocean from the porthole in an emergency door. Restlessness makes me a poet.” But the gift of the lyrical poet is song and there is an elevated feeling that comes when the poet is in the grip of the poem. So, in this respect a poet can soar, even with his feet placed firmly on the ground. Cherkovski continues the poem,

we sit together  
we talk of redemption ...

here in the frost it is possible to believe  
that one may die a better way

Before continuing, it is worth repeating the last lines of the following poem by Kenneth Patchen:

I am turning the lights out now.  
A red wind crawls in over the water.  
Before I come again, in my own honor,  
Men will have gone down like pricked guts;  
Murder will walk the world.  
All the nice kids will be puked clean.

Who will listen? who will care?

Don't fight their war!  
Tell them to go to hell!

This isn't a poem. This is a sob and a death rattle.  
Who will listen? who will care?  
A black wind blows in over the graves.

I will not believe it—  
But it is true.  
It is true.

Below, Cherkovski addresses Miriam Patchen, Kenneth's wife, and the line in italics is a quote from a section of the poem quoted above. Cherkovski concludes, "When the Crow and I are Alone" in the following way, as if in response to the sad truth that Patchen speaks about in the poem above:

the harbinger flies into the room  
I shut the window

dear Miriam there is a reason  
I have held it  
the planet is alive  
*"I say the drums are going like mad"*  
when the crow and I are alone

There are forces of nature stronger than the "monolithic technology" that threatens to overtake the entire earth. Still, it's not a pretty picture. But Cherkovski emphasizes in "I didn't do it" that he is not guilty, he's not responsible for all this corporate greed. He didn't evict anyone, or start a war, or humiliate someone on the Internet. Instead, he writes:

I'm happy  
just to be

a calm and  
cultivated  
soul pacing  
the sanctuary  
my place of refuge

And in the end, after the day is over, we're only left with ourselves, anyway, with our own thoughts, our own body, our own baggage, so why not just accept yourself, and say "Yeah, that's me" in the mirror and be proud, enjoy the sight of your naked body, don't be pompous or vain. That's Cherkovski's advice and he's been around long enough to know the truth about this society: "you'll love me / and then loathe me," and he is shrewd enough to dish it right back: "but I'll do the same / for you."

*The Crow and I* is a masterful collection by a poet who knows the score. Cherkovski was close with many of the so-called Beat Movement writers and continues today to write poetry that is tough, lyrical, and very wise in an unconventional way. In this volume, he tackles the fundamental issues surrounding love and the fact of growing older, while "counting the steps to paradise." No wonder he writes, "I surrender to the seraphim," those angelic beings associated with ardor and light. His poems are truly illuminations.

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## The Crisis of Subjectivity

### On Robert Creeley's Poem "Anger"

Robert Creeley's poem, "Anger," draws attention to the dangers of subjectivity and unmediated thought, the results of which lead to a rupturing of the relation between self and a common world. Creeley has written, "poems like 'One Way,' 'Some Afternoon,' and 'Anger,' — that was 1964 — represent for me the apex of trying to write from inside the emotion." Of the three poems, "Anger," stands out as a fully developed statement of the futility of the subjective stance. This poem is the culmination of his early work, a final reckoning of the "I" whose posture had become rigid, isolate.

In the early work, subjectivity is not experienced as "existential freedom but an oppressive captivity." The relation between the self and the other is strained to the point of rupture. While subjectivity yields multiple perspectives, they all appear "locked in / self sight, not / the world what / ever it is." The point of reference is the self alone in the world. In the poem, "For Love," Creeley writes, "what own / statement, wants to / turn away, endlessly / to turn away." The inability to substantiate anything in the real world is the fate of a highly subjective stance. In looking at itself the self seems separate, split. In "Anger," as in many of the poems in *Words* (1969), it is as though the speaker is ob-

serving himself from the distance, detached, a separate entity. Creeley writes, "I cannot see myself / but as what I see, an / object but a man." The attempt to substantiate the self as object leads to the speaker's observation that he is a man with a "lust for forgiveness, / raging, from that vantage, / secure in the purpose, / double, split." This split is expressed in the first part of the poem where the speaker feels himself submerged in a "hole / for anger." As he is submerged, he "watches on / the edge of it, / as if she were / not to be pulled in, / a hand could / stop him." It is as though the speaker, an Orpheus-type figure speaking to his Eurydice, is watching himself helplessly descend, as though, "trapped inside something and unable to get out." Creeley writes, "I think I think / but find myself in it." That "it" is nothing other than itself, an empty hole, a mirror held up to a mirror, thought thinking about itself. The concentrated poetic energy achieved in the last lines of the first part does not lend itself to easy explanation. The lines threaten to break down under the intensity of the emotion, the concentrated energy of the release. Something has changed, the speaker perceives the woman as double, his hands held out to the one, "while the other / moans in the hole / in the floor, in the wall." Tom Clark has written that the image of the hole may have been the result of an experience in Creeley's early childhood. Creeley writes,

We had a cesspool out behind the house, at this now unutilized farm in which we still lived after my father's death, that I actually fell into once. I can't remember it, but was told. Apparently I was in a classic sailor's suit, fell in, and came out half-darkened.

Creeley has described the image as "a kind of perverse well of shit — a deep hole." The image is used to describe an emotional state that impacts him as though it was a physical presence intruding upon the speaker.

The crisis of subjectivity enacted in the poem stems from an event which is not made explicit but implies sexual resentment

and discontent. The domestic situation is exhausted to a point of contention:

In all they save,  
in the way of his saving  
the clutter, the accumulation

of the expected disorder —  
as if each dirtiness,  
each blot, blurred  
happily, gave  
purpose, happily —

All of which forces the sense that, “she is not enough there.” The bitter irony of the third part suggests sexual frustration as a result of unfaithfulness; Creeley writes, “and you screamed too / with the other, in pleasure.” The tension in these last lines is heightened by the preceding descriptions of imagined violence. The implications of this poem are inseparable from the Puritan strain in Creeley’s work. Speaking of Creeley, Tom Clark writes,

Puritan self-torment, the poet has written, may achieve a highly sophisticated formality that is the ultimate epistemological invention of a culture responsible for the proposition, “that pain was perhaps the most formal means society had evolved for the experience of itself.”

The trial of endless emotional labor that characterizes such a temperament can be seen as thematic in Creeley’s work in general. In “Anger,” though, Creeley writes, “But also / the pleasure, / the / opening / relief / even in what / was so hated.” But, in speaking of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Creeley had written

That book is a great relief of feelings that are of the human context. Therefore their admission into the writing with such intensity and clarity is already a great relief of all that surrounds him.

The mind seeks to release itself from the cage of introspection.

The minimalism of Creeley's early work tended to favor abstractions and generalizations. In "Anger," the world finally reduces to a voice, isolate, with no other reference than itself. Creeley here is concerned with Puritanism's mind/body split, the well of darkness that opens upon, like a deep "hole," between self and object. In *Autobiography*, Creeley writes, "This must be thought of as Puritanism, a curious split between the physical fact of a person and that thing they otherwise think with, or about, the so-called mind." Furthermore, Creeley writes, "with the denial of any Collective everything moves in, so the inside becomes the whole scene." The last lines of Anger can be seen in this Puritan context. The rhythm of the lines is less abrupt than earlier in the poem.

All you say you want  
 To do to yourself you do  
 To someone as yourself  
 And we sit between you  
 Waiting for whatever will  
 Be at last the real end of you.

This is the "ultimate protestant introspection." Creeley is expressing the mirroring effect of the isolated subject. One does not act in relation to another but solely in relation to oneself as another. And contained within this self is a jury that condemns this very self.

The ultimate result of this crisis of subjectivity is the loss of the sense of a common world. The words deflate in the absence of a world. They remain cold and rigid, bloodless objects. Life becomes, "an open / hole of horror, of // nothing as if not / enough there is / nothing. A pit — ." The poet searches for, "some odor / which is anger, // a face / which is rage." The attempt to objectivize the emotional content prove futile, a "pattern," which "is only resemblance," or furthermore, "a sign quickly adapted, / shifted to make // a horrible place / for self-satisfaction."

An examination of the use of pronouns in the poem reveals the progression from the singular to the collective. The “we” in the last lines of the poem are the voices of the world that stand between “yourself” and “someone else as yourself.” They can be seen as the voice of social conscience or a warning about the dangers of unmediated thought. Creeley, in conversation with Lewis Macadams, has said,

A few weeks ago in Vancouver I had a reading, and I was trying not nicely or sweetly to make known to this young group the horrors of thinking that thought itself can possess the world... And that’s why I kept writing, “I want to get out of my mind.” I mean, I didn’t want a deracination of the senses, but wanted to get out of that awful assumption that thinking is the world.

Finally, “Anger” can be seen as a transitional poem. The domestic situation exhausted, subjectivity reduced to an experience of futility, the mind become its own prison, the poem finally reveals the ways we have cut ourselves off from the common world, from the human context. In a world increasingly “virtual,” Creeley’s poem stands out as a relevant warning. This poem leads to the reconsideration of the nature of language and self in *Pieces* (1969), and this leads to a significant transition in Creeley’s later work.

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## A Brief Review of John Ashbery's *Library of America Collected Poems (1991–2000)*

*I have seen it all, and I write, and I have seen nothing.*

John Ashbery died on September 3, 2017 at the age of ninety. His life in poetry was astonishing by anyone's standards; he won almost every major prize for poetry except the Nobel and published many books to critical acclaim, such as *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. He has been called the most innovative and important poet of his generation and the most imitated. This second volume of his *Collected Poems* marks a turning point in Ashbery's work, one where, beginning with *Flow Chart*, he confronts his mortality and reflects on his past life, his failures and his successes, as well as his current position in the poetry world.

This second volume of the Library of America's Edition of Ashbery's *Collected Poems* spans the years from 1991 to 2000 and includes several important books, such as *Hotel Lautremont*, *And The Stars Were Shining*, *Can You Hear, Bird*, *Wakefulness*, *Girls On The Run*, *Your Name Here*, and a number of uncollected poems. Of note is the uncollected poem, "Hoboken," which was an early collage poem that in fact predated Burroughs's and Gysin's work with the cut-up technique. These

books find Ashbery continuing to experiment with language, venturing into new territory with the first of the books collected here, *Flow Chart*.

*Flow Chart* stands as the major work in this volume, and while there is much here to satisfy an Ashbery enthusiast, I would like to focus primarily on this book, originally published by Knopf in 1991; it lays the groundwork for some of the subsequent themes that emerge in this second volume. I think of *Flow Chart* of as a kind of memoir, or better yet a diary (“Even my diary has become an omen to me, and I know how I’ll have to go on writing; it would be disappointed / otherwise”), in which Ashbery offers his coded impressions on love, politics, the contemporary world of poetry and his own position in it—his youth as a young gay man and his life in a rural setting in Hudson, New York, all of which he treats in a witty yet reflective and critical way, often humorous and ironical. We witness his mind at work in these pages. His tone changes as often as his thoughts, the sentences like a winding road in a forest, leading him to unfamiliar territory, where he views the sometimes wonderful landscapes of memory, or relives experiences that caused him to reevaluate his life. He is at once cerebral, and elegiac, exhibiting a relation to nature reminiscent of Wordsworth. For Ashbery the natural world offers some relief from the stress of living, just like a close friend or a lover would; he is a kind of modest pagan, a nature poet in an urban landscape. And in each of sections of this long poem we are reminded of Ashbery’s linguistic invention, humor, and elusive style.

Though life in the Hudson valley is “reasonably absorbing / and there are a lot of nice people around” Ashbery reminds us of “that feeling of emptiness” that “keeps turning up like a stranger you’ve seen dozens of times, out of focus / usually.” Recent political news hardly offers any relief: “Now the news of inflation. How to combat it? Is there any world-power / so stupid / it thinks it must have the answer, or that an answer actually exists?” And those “peaceful voices, rising / tier on tier / in the storied gothic cathedral, go unheard. Nobody thinks it’s time for them.” World peace is always just beyond one’s reach and

of course the politicians never know what they're doing. Ashbery's mind follows the meandering way of its thoughts, not governed by a logic imposed by the System, but by the nonlinearity of dreams and memory and followed by abrupt shifts to the present, where Ashbery writes, "My hair, today, is beautifully combed. I am on a roll, I guess." Witty, yes, but the truth concealed in such a remark is that we all are, no matter that we don't often say it, vain to a certain extent. "Set in our ways" as we grow older.

Now older, Ashbery gives his impressions of his fame as a poet and his position with relation to the younger poets: "it has all been in vain, this celebration: listen, / what do children think of you now? Suddenly everyone is / younger, and many of them not all / that young, either, and who, do you suppose loves you?" Life is made up of a sequence of events, the meaning of which consistently eludes our attempts at full understanding, however hard we try to make sense of ourselves and the world. Every thought is an incomplete thought, which leads one in a different direction. We despair of ever coming to terms with society, finding acceptance there instead of having to battle the political and social forces that seek to destroy us year after year, that affect ourselves and others, and for which love appears at times a solution though not without its own set of often insoluble problems. But not always. There are small victories sometimes; and we must not lose hope.

So, life goes on. We feel the need "to keep up appearances, impress the neighbors," but you must never let your guard down. And what of regret? Ashbery writes, "I thought of all my lost days and how much more I could / have done with them, / if I had known what I was doing. But does one ever?" Make peace with yourselves or at least try to, there is nothing to know, you'll ask yourself what it all means, you'll ask others, but no one can provide the answer. That's life. Put aside thoughts of "what could have been / if one had made the slightest / exertion in another direction." You'll find "it's always a relief to come / back / to the beloved home with its misted windows, its teakettle, its / worn places on the ceiling, / for better or worse." There

is a sense of resignation in these lines, a result of his reflections on his mortality, of our collective fate. But this, of course, does not mean the fight is over. After all, experience does teach you things and you go on: “Only give no thought to the morrow – / it will presently arrive and take care of itself, you’ll see.” Go contrary, don’t take the straight path in life. In “Going Away Any Time Soon” from *Wakefulness*, Ashbery writes, “What good are rules anyway / They apply only to themselves and other rules.” Reason and logic will get you so far and then you’ll find yourself confronting the unknown, you’ll meet strangers in bars or on the street and these are the best teachers.

Ashbery’s poems are about feeling rather than emotion; about texture and surface rather than meaning, and in this they are similar to abstract painting—collage-like rather than logically constructed. Marshall Olds, writing on Late Romanticism in an essay called “Literary Symbolism”: “The physical universe, then, is a kind of language that invites a privileged spectator to decipher it, although this does not yield a single message so much as a superior network of associations.” Ashbery writes,

I could never bring myself to offer my experiments the gift  
of objective, scientific,  
evaluation. Anything rather than that! So I feel I have  
wandered too long in the halls of the nineteenth century: its  
exhibits, talismans,  
prejudices and doomed expeditions are but too familiar  
to me; I must shade my eyes from the light with my hands,  
the light of  
the explosion of the upcoming twentieth century.

Ashbery is a kind of master ventriloquist. He’s the maestro of the voices he uses to talk to himself in his own mind. They are incantatory, scolding, disgusted, delighted, genial, nonsensical. They belong to the various characters the poet inhabits, the various masks he wears. On subjectivity, Ashbery writes, “And I purposely refrained from consulting *me*, / The *culte du moi* being a dead thing, a shambles. That’s what led to me.” This

rejection of the conventional lyric poem (“enough of this self-congratulation in Aegean sunrises. Who are we, after all? And who needs profundity?”), with its presumptions of a speaker with a singular identity, whose emotion is the central focus of the poem. This leads to a different sense of the self, as a kind of aura, elusive, and changeable, a glimpse of which, like a flickering light in the dark, occasionally appears in an Ashbery poem. At times Ashbery uses the “we” to express solidarity with society, from which he feels marginalized, but solidarity does not last, and he retreats into a private world. In “The Village of Sleep” from *Wakefulness*, he writes, “That spasm I created for my own diversion, now it’s clearly emerging out of the octopus drool that so long enshrouded it, while I, a nether spur to its district railway, am overrun with coughing doubt for the duration, yet here I must stand, a seeming enigma.”

For all the resistance to meaning in a typical Ashbery poem, he has certainly become less “obscure” to readers, as a result of all the critical analysis devoted to his work over the years. But in “A Poem of Unrest” from *Can You Hear, Bird*, Ashbery writes:

But since I don't understand myself, only segments  
of myself that misunderstand each other, there's no  
reason for you to want to, no way you could

even if we wanted it.

There are things that simply can't be understood about a person, however much we try. It is a sobering thought for those who believe in reason and believe that we can fully understand each other, our reasons for doing what we do, acting the way we do, saying the things we say. We try to understand but fail. This does not mean, of course, that there aren't moments when we are surprised about what we find out about each other. There is a light in the darkness. And if we're not stubborn, we won't insist on trying to explain that which defies explanation. After all, the problem may simply be in the approach you take. Ashbery, in the excerpted lines above, could almost be giving us a

hint about his own work. His poems are made of these “segments of myself that misunderstand each other” and thus are the result of dialogue in his own mind and with the reader. The conversation with reader will continue as we read him, discuss his work, teach him in classrooms, and write essays and books on him. He will be important to future readers as he has been to many in the past and in the present. Ashbery’s work points to the future and reminds us of the need for risk in the pursuit of self-knowledge. It also reminds us that poetry, like jazz, needs to stretch its boundaries and seek out new terrain in order to remain a vital force in our time.

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## On Barbara Barg's *Obeying the Chemicals*

*Is Not the speed of Light the speed of Darkness?*

Published in 1984 by Hard Press and now long out of print, Barbara Barg's chapbook, *Obeying the Chemicals*, is a powerhouse of feminist energy, whose central emotions veer from unrelieved anger to gentleness and vulnerability. There is a longing for not exactly love, but ecstasy, a feeling that transcends the common romantic notions of love: "I could say I love you / but that's a childish idea / (feelings are no mystery until we try to phrase them) / I'm simply ecstatic being with you like / and ecstasy is all I want." Love doesn't have a chance under Capitalism. In the long poem, "Fucking Bench," the bench becomes, through repetition of the phrase, "fucking bench," a kind of symbol of the bare essentials, a simple "fucking" bench, in the big city, and with a "fucking" tree opposite it, and the sunlight that falls on it, as if any of that really mattered in light of the world's problems; the poet is just able to rest a while on this "fucking" bench, thank you, where maybe the homeless sleep, instead of a fancy couch, in an upper west side condo. That's Capitalism; real love doesn't have a chance.

But anger suddenly gives way to sadness and existential fear:

Oh fucking anxiety infecting my timid plans like ugly water spots on glasses!

Shit.

Will I not cease loving the flesh and being afraid of suffer-  
ings?

Thank fucking God I had on my shades or I couldn't have  
sat

On that fucking bench with tears rolling down my cheeks  
And memory calling me home and turning me away from  
home and calling me home

And turning me away from home.

There's the pull of safety, a home, a familiar place, but the poet resists that thought; comfort might ease her anxiety or fear, but at what price? The fire of the poem. She must "obey the chemicals" which, while suggesting the influence of drugs, that cause one to abandon rational, bourgeois, thought, also suggests the mysterious directives that a poet follows, despite the pain of living in the world. Finally, it suggests the daemonic voice that blasphemes in the poem.

Her suffering has its origin in religious ideas that she was taught as a child, ideas that cause fear of the body, and which the "blasphemy" of this poem seeks to exorcise. Barg writes,

I say to myself all the time I say:

*Cease from your evil lusts and desires pale one  
and avoid empty and worldly chatter on godless courses and  
salacious myths  
outwardly very charming  
but intrinsically germinated from vile minds and the devil's  
ugliness.*

She undergoes a series of emotional ups and downs in her relationships, from shame to guilt to a feeling of danger, and these emotions manifest as a physical pain: her beautiful, black boots suddenly hurt her toes. She thanks the "unambitious Gnostics" for the "pretentious" thought that "*The kingdom of death belongs to those who put themselves to death.*" In a way, it's a provocative thought she accepts: "Then I liked that thought." In his essay

on Poe, Baudelaire writes, "Amongst the large number of the *Rights of Man*, which the nineteenth century, in its wisdom, so often enumerates with complacency, two quite important ones have been forgotten, namely our right to contradict ourselves, and our right to quit this life." Barg continues, "Then I felt compassion / Then I felt mature and able to achieve deep levels of human understanding / Then I grew greatly angered at C for helping me / pay no attention to the loveliness and beauty of the world / whether it be beautiful food or clothing, or a cell / or an outwardly seductive book." She continues in her rage,

Then I thought: O bullshit Babe  
*The defilement of the Law belongs to the Light.*  
 Fucking inner life, fucking C and his ferocious saintliness.

She attacks the idea of a God and the divine light; the blasphemy at the heart of this poem radiates its infernal light in all its seductive glory. She directs her fury at "Saintliness" and the "inner life," the life that centers the gaze inward in order to find the light of truth, the truth that denies the flesh, and subjects the body to constant inner surveillance. Instead, she will "empty my brain of all the crudhead and annoying chatter — / in a brand new red dress baby / with some emerald green and purple maybe somewhere on it / or a little orange / beastcause to me, these are the earth tones." She is Jezebel, Medusa, Mary Magdalene, the Eternal Temptress, a female trickster; her domain is the earth, the material world: not the heavens, not the life of the spirit, the divine light, but the natural world. In *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard writes,

This separation from Nature under the sign of the principle of production is fully realized by the capitalist system of political economy, but obviously it does not emerge with political economy. The separation is rooted in the great Judeo-Christian dissociation of the soul and Nature. God created man in his image and created Nature for man's use.

And furthermore, she quotes sacred scripture: “*Whosoever shall find the interpretations of these scriptures shall not experience death!*” To which she responds, “Ha! Fucking idiots will believe anything that stinks of immortality.” She sees the idea of immortality as just another trick of the Judeo-Christian doctrine, one that keeps people living in fear, placing their faith in the unknown, and giving them a little false hope to combat the real suffering in the world. But sexuality makes us the most vulnerable, especially with someone we have a crush on. Love prompts us to come clean about our emotions: “I felt humanly vulnerable spilling my guts so.” But then the vulnerability passes, then “a tear fell,” then a realization,

the reason fucking pain in fucking person not on fucking  
 bench nay  
 not even in fucking park is beastcause  
 two people cannot be in love and live together always in-  
 tensely in love  
 I mean isolatedly living in intense rapturous lust — killing  
 love I mean  
 inseparable love I mean two fucking people when world is  
 so insist  
 I mean cannot keep up this high fidelity for more than say  
 5 years.

In the nineties they used to say you shouldn’t stay at a job for more than five years; it gets stale after that; advance to a higher position where there is more money and prestige. Love doesn’t stand a chance under Capitalism.

The poem concludes on an emotional high point which transcends the pain of any individual, and the blasphemies uttered are transformed into an urgent prayer of genuine compassion and hope. It is worth quoting this passage in full so none of the energy is lost:

I want to be flying bird  
 and not dwell on D.’s attraction to my psychodrama

so I think I send and then I send  
every thought each to a different place  
and I myself fly up into the fucking tree  
and then I'm god and these particular pains are no gods'  
faults.

These particular pain are nothing to blame.

I have pain. C has pain. Probably even D has pain.

I bet A has pain & E has pain.

My mother knows from pain and my father too.

My brother used to suffer enormous pain but he converted  
to Hebrew Christianity and feels none of it now he reports  
in his tense little voice.

I bet you can't really escape pain if you're human at fucking  
all.

I bet everyone reeks of fucking pain.

I bet every fucking mammal that walks erect on two feet  
and buries its dead

is scarred by something horrible and continuously menac-  
ing.

And it isn't my intention to divorce myself from the masses  
and identify my responsibility with self-interest or  
the interests of a small group.

I just want to have some fun like the next guy.

And I bet I do

Goddamnit

seek the fucking night of the living night again.

Look out Jerusalem! Look out Islam!

Fucking pleasure and imagination's flesh

Fucking mythological life

Fucking pulse and opportunity

Fucking celebration of human life again

Fucking pulse and opportunity      opportunity

Fucking pulse      Fucking pulse

Some of Barg's concerns in this poem, such as the problem of pain and suffering in the world, the desire for a mythology that would address women's real issues, the celebration of life in the

face of difficulty, the freedom to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh without guilt or shame are developed in the next poem, "The Outline of Birthday," where they are seen in Gnostic terms, as an essential problem with the way mankind and the world was created, revealing a fault at the origin; this is explored in full in the transgressive final prose poem "Jihad," where Barg rewrites the male-centric, origin story.

The "Outline of Birthday" takes the form of an adult addressing a younger person on his birthday. But Barg subverts the literary conceit of the father addressing the young man before he enters the world. Barg's "Birthday" poem is also concerned with the birth of mankind and it is darker than any postcard birthday poem. She writes, "Happy birthday even though / the age of mammals culminated / in ice / and hardship / and 'man,' ... and now inside our growing brains is the increasing chill of our intelligence. Want to fuck? Want? Want to be kind to each other? ... we deserve nothing but the best / of all possible worlds." Against the increasing dominance of a cold "intellectual" theorizing about the world and language, present most vividly in the Academy, Barg responds with a desire to explore the body, to indulge in the pleasures of sexuality, instead of pursuing the false pleasure in knowledge, which seeks truth but only finds provisional solutions for the deepest of the world's problems. So pain, guilt, and shame are a result of the way the world was conceived, at the origin, the way it was constructed after the Cosmic Egg cracked. There is a problem, even, with the way the body was conceived of. At the origin something went terribly wrong. In "Jihad," the final poem in the chapbook, Barg dissects the problem and shows us where we went wrong. Love doesn't stand a chance under Capitalism, but then, according to Barg, this is the least of our problems when we consider the world in mythological and religious terms, the world conceived of by man.

In the first line of "Jihad," Barg sketches the main subject of her essay-poem: "1. Woman-Desire-Love-Slut-Goddess-Light-Raw." We are no longer in a male space. Indeed, the Rabbi Sime-

on is mocked during his discussion of the origin of the world. The Rabbi says,

If the Holy One, the Loneliest Number, had not created a spirit you understand of good don't you see of good, created a spirit of good that that emanates from the active light (Gladness!) and a spirit of, well, I hate to use the term because of its moral implication, but well uh evil that emanates from the passive light or darkness (Not being Glad).

The character, Little Bornio, described by Barg as a she or it, thus potentially androgynous, responds to the Rabbi,

What the fffuck,...Passive light or darkness? You old fart-hearts! You dried up old tight-asses, you cuntphobic Cos-sacks!

The Rabbi continues:

... ahum, uh there, un mental, uh growth and spiritual development and of course progress; and therefore was he/himself created dual, as we are informed in the Zohar, dual in nature, that is like sort of like flesh = bad, and spirit = Not bad.

So the story goes: the active light (male) is distinguished from the passive light or darkness (female); darkness = void = hole = vagina. Furthermore, the flesh (the earth) is bad but the spirit (the heavens) is good. This formulation of religious thought has haunted the world ever since the birth of Judeo-Christian thought. There is the central problem with the creation story. For Barg, the cosmic unity separated into a duality which associated Man with the Light of Reason containing an active spirit, and the Female, who had a passive spirit, under the rule of the Irrational. Thus, the female is a demonic figure, a witch. But in this poem, Barg is imagining the world before the Cosmic Egg split and everything went wrong. The lady in a red dress would say,

*I need the darkness again I need it so dark open eyes don't rest on any objects open eyes go straight out to outland. I'm circling, circling my own self again. Not much weight of me floating in darkness. I'm weightless and sweetly chimed, weightless and circling, lifting the eyes of my head coming around again, circling round is also my ears again buzzzzzed and again yy-eesssssssss.*

Another character in the poem, Ludwig, a homosexual,

raised his well-scrubbed hand and then his other well-scrubbed hand and asked the Rabbi, "Would it be conceivable for someone to see as black everything that we see as white, and vice versa?"

"No," replied the Rabbi Simeon, "but you can make number 2."

Life is multiplication just as each new life from naturely various billions.

(Nancy Reagan and I are opposite sexes)

The world applauds.

The poet is against the Rabbi's insistence on maintaining the duality; she emphasizes the difference between people, which is only increased when there are more people in the world; no two people are the same; furthermore the gender roles of male and female are fluid: "Nancy Reagan and I are opposite sexes." The poet as transsexual writes,

And spake the mighty Goddess and they said: Let she/it who seeks continue seeking till she/it finds, and when she/it will be astonished, and when she/it becomes astonished, let her kill (or at least trash) this pretense of The Immovable Species, and she/he might yea might she/he come to know this hundred-mindedness, thousand-heartedness.

Instead of two, a million, billions, trillions ... Barg's vision here is of a world of elaborate variety, where the desires of men,

woman, and LGBT people, are so numerous so as not to be confined or codified by tradition or convention. In this way, Barg's poem is relevant today, where LGBT people, because of their use of gender pronouns, are waging a battle against a world that is increasingly turning toward the Right. When the "Creative Logos" speaking from "The Holy One" "(later known as the Holy One times Three after the biggest hoax ever perpetrated by the enshrinement of poetic diction, that is The Fucking Word, Old and New)" concluded speaking, the angels Aza and Azael reprimanded God, claiming that there was no reason to create "Thy/man Law" knowing that he would sin (female) with the "passive-light/woman called darkness/woman." Borneo erupts in anger at this kind of thinking: "You old bearded shiteyes, scholars of idiocies, you fucking fabricators of fornication terrors ... You can't even look upon your own hard-ons without being scared the fuck to death you pissheads." Borneo is not buying the claims of the Creative Logos. She/it sees this as a repressive force generated by a male-centric vision of the origin myth. As an alternative to this myth, Barg invokes the myth of the "Goddess/Slut." She writes,

A Goddess/Slut behaves in accordance with Her/Her divine nature and the Human laws of sexual morality, physical gravity and the comings and goings of the 5th avenue bus do not apply here.

The final lesson: *Reject and Rejoice*. Barg writes,

We do have a few minutes before the vacuum of eternity sucks us bone and soul out of the vibrant egg. Is myth-zone through space of time/mind a pressure of specific density and pulsation? Am I a woodcutter. Is Not the speed of Light the speed of Darkness? Am I a perfect example why people shouldn't have kids? Is everyday?

Are you happy Baby?

In "Jihad" Barg rewrites the creation myth in terms of female desire and imagines a time before the Cosmic Egg split. She envisions a reversal of the terms, Female / Active, Male/Passive. She embraces the darkness of primal and irrational desires, not the shining light of absolute truth. In this she overturns the Creative Logos: "That which we cannot speak of we must point to screaming." What we cannot speak of belongs to the irrational subconscious, the vast ocean that threatens to engulf the man-made structures. Instead of rational, Apollonian form, in language, she gives voice to the "scream"; this is the voice of blasphemy which infects the language; it obeys the chthonic; it is in league with Thanatos as much as it desires to express the ecstatic pleasures of the flesh, Eros; knowledge of our own mortality lends an urgency to all our acts. Our happiness should not be contingent on ephemeral joys but on a more genuine and lasting happiness about our own selves, and our bodies, without any guilt or shame. *Obeying the Chemicals* is a fierce and intelligent book whose raw energy should be savored by anyone interested not only in poetry but in honest writing of the highest order.

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## On Murat Nemet-Nejat's *The Spiritual Life of Replicants*

*A dart's / instantaneous / license.*

The central heresy of *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* is that “the body is immortal, the soul mortal.” Nemet-Nejat writes that it is the body that is “endlessly involved in transformations, into dust, into humus, into water, into food chains ... into star dust.” It is the body that continually seeks another body to inhabit after death and thus yearns to be immortal. This is similar to the drama of the Bardo state in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. But the soul, “the mind’s eye” is “less durable than an electron.” For Nemet-Nejat, both the soul as well as the words on the page, whose insufficiency every poet knows, are the “parasites in process in the unending flow of things ... but nowhere, nowhere the same.” It is seeing with the mind’s eye, “one’s struggle against the materiality of things — of language” that causes one to become “inevitably snared by it,” “the yellow of the carpet / lurks in the yellow of my eye. // and waits.”

Nature is “condemned to a prison / of colors.” This is a problem of consciousness. Nemet-Nejat writes, speaking of the Eda of Turkish Poetry, “*Consciousness dies, the eye dis-solves into motion, silhouetted by the dark matter of words*” [my emphasis]. This human eye transforms into the mechanical eye, (the “I”

merges with the “eye” in an “open-ended weave of language,”) a camera that photographs the words as they pass before it, that emerge in light, and vanish in darkness. *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* is a record of their traces on the page. Nemet-Nejat quotes the filmmakers, Godard, Brakhage, and Bresson. Each of these filmmakers broke, in their own way, with narrative films of the Hollywood sort, or, more precisely, each has created a new kind of narrative, using various techniques. For example, Brakhage used methods like painting on celluloid, scratching on film, multiple exposures, and fast cutting. Speaking of Godard, Nemet-Nejat refers to a process of eliminating or fighting against the authority of the frame. In this way, the invisible makes itself known. This is not an intellectual process but one of perception and change of consciousness. This kind of “seeing” involves a de-centering of the self. The fragmentary nature of the poems acts as a series of gestures toward the invisible. The fragment is “devoid of any lyric persona (no lyric I)” but replaced with the “mechanical eye” of the lens. The human eye is a subjective device, that involves the processing of light by the human brain. A mechanical eye, like a camera, is an objective or absolute measuring device, that is, the sensor that receives the light is “dumb.” Robert Bresson is important to Nemet-Nejat because the subjectivity of his “models” approaches the objective: “The models mechanized externally” and yet, Bresson writes that they are “internally free.” Again, Bresson writes, “The thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me and, above all, *what they do not suspect is in them.*”

Nemet-Nejat has an interest in these filmmakers and their various techniques which they translated to the camera, since he translates them to the poem. Each page is like a frame, or a snapshot, the record of a moment in language. Nemet-Nejat writes, “I feel, old man, *seeingly* in the calligraphy of sudden thoughts” [my emphasis]. Nemet-Nejat has spoken of the words as constellations or musical notations, or as calligraphy. I imagine words in this book as birds in flight, their movement captured by the lens, which is the “mechanical eye” looking. Words on the page are bent and lengthened, almost like calligraphic

signs, as if a photograph was taken of them as they raced across the mind. They are like traces of a movement of thought in language. Language is not stable but fluid, as is the camera panning across the page. And then again, in some cases, the camera (the poet's I/eye) is fixed on a non-moving sequence of words. In *The Peripheral Space of Photography*, Nemet-Nejat speaks of his affinity for photographs that are "imperfect," that have an element of surprise, and reveal qualities of the "man behind the camera" that he might not even be aware of. He also examines the tension between the "seer" and the "seen" and the way the subject's "pose" can subvert the photographer's attempts at a conventional image, or tease the "seen" into active thought. Of course, this essay shares a similar objective with "The Question of Accent." In both cases, Nemet-Nejat is keenly aware of the ways in which power and authority work in photography, through focus, framing, "clarity," and, in American English, through flatness, neutrality, global dominance. A poet should rebel against this, and *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* shows, convincingly, a reader the reason why.

Blurs, scratches, and so on can produce in a photo a kind of "spiritual light" that "is not transparent but "impure," as against the attempts to create "ART," — to regulate the pose to simulate a painting. In attempting to capture "the god of the forest," Bra-khage writes, "It had to do with the history of painting rather than any wood creature." Finally, this "impurity," these words in motion that leave traces of flight on the page, akin to the scratches and blurs of photography, are like the memory of a still in a projected film. The cinematic "eye," the soul, is not durable, as the body is, or spiritually pure as in Christian doctrine. In fact, this inversion of Christian doctrine is at the heart of Nemet-Nejat's Sufism, and thus this "eye/soul" is not stable, but in motion, panning, establishing long shots, questioning the nature of the frame, all of which, produces traces, scratches, blurs, that don't so much establish fixed meanings but rather tease the mind into active thought. I feel it is from this heresy in Nemet-Nejat's Sufism that the poems receive their energy and forward propulsion in creating "a spiritual filmic language," enacting a

drama between the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual, being and non-being, the “I” and the “eye,” human and machine, until there is “A motion of light without the camera obscura, two entities pressing against each other.” It is an ecstatic moment when the ego and the material dissolve, and two entities press close to each other. There is an echo here of a great Turkish poem, Güntan’s “Romeo and Romeo.” The above was my experience of reading *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* during a time when I was watching many films and making films.

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## A Brief Note on Murat Nemet-Nejat's *The Peripheral Space of Photography*

I just finished your book, *The Peripheral Space of Photography*. I share your affinity for photographs that are “imperfect,” that have an element of surprise, and that reveal qualities of the “man behind the camera” that he might not even be aware of.<sup>1</sup> I agree that blurs, scratches, and so on can produce in a photo a kind of “spiritual light” that “is not transparent but “impure” as against the attempts to create “ART,” that is to regulate the pose, to avoid looking in the camera, to simulate a painting. I like too your examinations of the tension between the “seer” and the “seen” and the way this “pose” can subvert the photographer’s attempts at a conventional image, that is, the gaze of Mrs. Lane. Of course, this essay shares a similar objective with “The Question of Accent.” In both cases you are keenly aware of the ways in which power and authority work (in photography: focus, framing, “clarity,” in American English: flatness, neutrality, global dominance) and, as you see it, a poet should rebel against this. I agree.

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<sup>1</sup> This is from an email I sent to the poet, Murat Nemet-Nejat, after reading his book, *The Peripheral Space of Photography*

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## Your Dark Eyes Don't Fool Me

### A Note on Stephen Jonas's Poem, "LXVI"

Stephen Jonas writes, in poem "LXVI" that "The First Matter of the spiritual work / is always w/ in us" and thus asserts a gnostic perspective which, broadly speaking, relies on a transformative energy that comes from what Jack Spicer called the Outside, variously defined, and is a source of knowledge other than faith. He writes, addressing the reader in an intimate, conversational manner, "consider w/me for a moment the phenomenon of / the burning bush." For Jonas, the burning bush is "all consuming but is not / itself consumed." Herein is "the Divine Seed / manifested to the beholders." This is not the gross material fire but the spiritual flame. He writes, "we (momentarily) approached / The Palace of the King, / after the descent from the Mount of Vision." Man has arrived at this point of revelation, but it is only momentary, the time of the poem.

He continues: "concerning the Lower to the Higher have I come to speak / of a grace above all // normal grace / recognized in the heart." Here I believe one can use the image of the rosy cross of the Rosicrucians to reflect on the nature of this grace. Each petal of the rose upon the cross signifies the acquisition of inner knowledge and as the rose continues to bloom there is a

fuller realization of the Great Work,<sup>1</sup> resulting in a state of grace not normally recognized, because of an order that cannot be reducible to terms outside its own. Nevertheless, Jonas writes, we “hear of stories” of “minor attainments” but they do not “bear close scrutiny.” “Hundreds,” he writes, “have wandered endlessly through maze / after maze of error lacking this preface,” i.e. misunderstanding the real work of poetry.

For Jonas “the quest begins & ends w/in.” Knowledge derived from “an audacious willingness to experience”<sup>2</sup> is the key to grace. All other attempts “to prod / further would be to multiply the deeply wooded.” “Beyond grace” Jonas writes, “I transgress not. / “make poetry” is my aim. // goldmaking / I leave to the cracks.” The poem is never in the service of the “goldmakers,” the false alchemists who claim to transform lead into gold and thus claim knowledge of the Divine agency. For them, the secret of money is that it’s shit, and it’s as if they “were / to defecate” and then from this expect to achieve “salvation.”

“The Divine is beyond our eager notions,” Jonas writes. Furthermore, he writes, “What can we give that is not a Gift of God?” What we give in the poem is a gift from the alien God. According to Jonas, we cannot do otherwise. For Jonas, the *Secretum Artis* / remains w/God & unpublished.” The *Poem* (as opposed, in Jonas’s formula, to the *poem*), the divine logos, remains “unpublished.” Spicer’s East Mars cannot be found on a map. The poet “makes the poem,” in other words, receives it by dictation and never through intention. It is not predetermined and where it goes “is anybody’s guess ... venus, mars, the kitchen sink, south station.”<sup>3</sup> In his final work, “Orgasms / Dominations” Jonas would answer the question “how do you write a poem” with “you don’t it comes to you,” and, furthermore, “It is not enough today / to say / ‘write.’” This word can only, like the

1 In a June letter from 1962 Jonas writes to Gerritt Lansing that, “the whole picture of the *Great Work* is clear.” In 1967 Jones, in the midst of writing the *Orgasms* writes to Lansing, “I allow the, what I term ‘poetic judgment,’ [to] take precedent over my formal judgment.”

2 From “Three Dance Moods for Ear,” in *Selected Poems*.

3 From part one of “Orgasms / Dominations,” in *Selected Poems*.

rational mind, approximate what actually occurs, which is, in a sense, that which you never saw coming. In this way the poem can “kill.”

It is the “Divine Seed,” the flame that consumes itself but is not itself consumed, that gives birth to and illuminates the poem but only for a moment. These are “illumination / problems / playing upon a surface,” because the poet is essentially in the dark. But to “make the poem” is to look “into the heart of light,” the light of knowledge, the rose blooming in the heart of man as he approaches the “The Palace of the King” or goes to meet that “queen with the gone stick,” his angel, his demon brother. In *Orgasms 2*, Jonas would write, “Only in The Poem, / only in the middle / of the interrupted Poem / do we come / to wing or brush stroke / what we know / we have come so / to know.”

“The search for truth can mislead us thru many corridors / of false leads,” Jonas writes. The “the word is loose” and in fragments. The Word is divided from the flesh. The words of the poem are like the fragments of an original unity and “the communication inaccurate if at all communicated.” In “Word on Measure” Jonas writes, “In the beginning: The Word / imperfect — half meaning half longing.” In the making of the poem what “rubs off” is “fairy dust.” The rest is “silence.”

Poets in the gnostic tradition, like Jonas, are “thrown back upon an earlier revelation” that is “better / suited to its times than this inchoate present.” In “Advertisements of the Tribes” he speaks of a prehistoric time when man known as a “Hunter / drew bison on the cave walls // altamira / buttocks as fine as any Ruben.” For Jonas, as well as for Spicer, there is the problem of representation in language. Jonas speaks of “the image that preceded the dream.” He glimpses the “cinematic exhibition / fragmentary or half- / illuminated, we glimpse / the pathos of / heretofore unplumbed depths / the which once long ago / a boor enlarged into / parenthesis, / voluminous & / syntactical.” Thus “God, its three selves, / give in and quietly / disentangle Himself / from a syntactical / subordination to the Word, / no longer made flesh.”

In "The Music Master (*after a Mozart divertimento*)" Jonas writes, "Use / the music of / the streets." He says, "you must / hear yr language spoken." He writes of the poem as a kind of mask, "drest." But he urges the reader to be "discreet / (upon the street)" and yet "in the pad ... / let the bedsprings creak. / Marvel. Question." Add petals to the rose of self-knowledge. Sex magick, the tantric mysteries. Thus the "*making*" of the poem is entwined about a sexual experience, or the possibility of consummation; its subject is always desire. The word and the flesh have the possibility of communing. But it is temporary and frustrated. Finally, when asked, "did you *make* him / YET?" the poet replies, "Hell noe / besides, he's straight." There is only the word that "bugs" the poet, "the crabbed ambiguity of lost connections," the word divided from the flesh.

Jonas concludes the poem: "In short, the music / is more explicit than the lyrics." The reason for this is that music can signal that which is beyond words, using the medium of language. The music transcends the limits of meaning. And thus more "explicitly" states what cannot be otherwise said. Where the words are fragments of an original unity, the music alludes to the unbroken state of origin. It does not mean. It represents desire.

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## Naturally We Are in Love On James Alexander's *Eternature*

*lovely to watch and long to live with*  
*forever*  
*the most musical word of truth*

If a younger poet knows the name of James Alexander, it is because of Jack Spicer's dedication of seven poems to him in a book he called *Apollo Sends Seven Nursery Rhymes to James Alexander* (1959). Alexander was the younger brother of the Black Mountain painter Paul Alexander. Spicer met Alexander in the fall of 1959 in San Francisco. Later that winter Alexander returned home to his parents who lived in Indiana. Spicer, who was in love with the young man and his poems and wrote letters to him in an attempt to keep up a correspondence. So much for the biographical info. But I'm not sure how many younger poets know that James Alexander also wrote a book of poems called *Eternature* (1965) or, if so, have even read it. In the early nineties when I was reading Jack Spicer, I wondered who James Alexander was. I searched the Small Press Distribution catalogue on a fluke and found a copy of *Eternature* for a few bucks. Soon after it arrived it was lost in a pile of books, because I was in the process of moving at the time and had put some of the books

in storage. Only recently has it surfaced again, and so I decided to give it a close reading. That is the occasion which produced this essay.

James Alexander's poetry inhabits a poetic space similar to Spicer's own. It has its "spooks" which invade the poem, and its own "grail castle" that the poet attempts to scale the heights of in order to prove his honor like a knight of Arthur's roundtable, and there is also the dictation that Alexander draws our attention to. Finally, Alexander's poem is a book-length, serial poem. But where Spicer's tone can be melancholic to the point of hopeless despair, Alexander's tone is lighter, more humorous, and he reaches a sort of conclusion about the human condition which is generally more optimistic than Spicer's own.

In "pain poem," Alexander writes "i've learned a lot from Jake Spacer / how to hate and spit and cuse." Of course, Alexander, being heterosexual, had a much easier time of it in the fifties than Spicer. Nevertheless, Spicer was a devoted gay activist and member of the West Coast gay liberation group called the Mat-tachine Society.

The first thing that strikes a reader when opening a copy of *Eturnature* is the many apparent spelling "errors."<sup>1</sup> The overall effect is of an alien script or indeed a dictated poetry, where the poet, as if with his eyes closed, or otherwise covered, has his hand moved quickly by an external force, over the page, so quick in fact, that a kind of shorthand develops, where the "sound" of the word, the music, the pure music, is more important than the formal spelling. Words are also partially spelled, or the tense is "wrong" according to conventional syntax: "you know I don't speak English / why do you talk to me in Greek."<sup>2</sup> The following is an example of some of these effects:

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- 1 Spicer writes, in *Morphemics*, that if "moon" "were spelled 'mune' it would not cause madness." I found this quote from Gustaf Sobin, a very different poet, in my copy of *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*: "how the / least / shift in syntax, tense / perception, would / re- / set the / heavens."
  - 2 Spicer characterized the problem in the following way, in his poem, "Transformations II": "Troy was a baby when Greek sentence structure emerged. This / was the real Trojan Horse. / The order changes. The

i get so i get scarce  
 watching all night  
 for a spook  
 or a pek  
 at stars

The poet is frightened of the wrong message being dictated into the poem from the Outside, where the “spooks” dwell; the radio transmission being a possible lie. In the darkness he hopes for a view of the stars, something to illuminate the real, the Truth. For Spicer this “light” was “the noise in the head of the prince. Something in God-language,” the pure music of the poem. In “love poem,” Alexander writes,

sure i'm nervous  
 i want to get out of here  
 where the sun reach my body and the birds careen  
 where the stars leave the sky and become personified  
 you talk too fast  
 how can the stars leave the sky

The conflict here is between reality and imagination. The poet desires a place where the sun can warm his body, and where the stars depart from the sky to become “personified.” This is a mythical space. One voice of the poem (the “spook”) implies to the poet that such an idea is ridiculous, and admonishes him for talking too fast, for “jumping the gun,” so to speak, making a bridge between the real and the imagination that can't exist. These are the language police that Spicer warned us about. The spooks contradict the poet for their amusement. Alexander writes, “to dream is part of our beauty / our relationship to the real.” In the poem the real can exist alongside the dream. The real is as much fact as fantasy. And, of course, this is a love

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Trojans / Having no idea of true or false syntax and having no recorded / language / Never knew what hit them.”

poem. The voices tried to undercut the emotion expressed in the poem. Alexander writes, concerning reality and dream:

I personally have had  
Inclinations to wonder where the dream  
Ends or what it has to do with reality  
This has led me thru harrowing  
Psychology but when I say dream  
Now I mean a tangible reality and  
When I say bring me to life i  
Mean neither from death nor deprivation  
When I say sweet chariot I do not  
Mean virginity when I say  
Life or sweet chariot I do not mean death  
I mean that apparently my metaphors are  
Inadequate  
When I say bring me to life I do not mean  
To death or worse than death  
I do not mean bordon on anything.

But “love poem” shows the way in which the Spiritworld operates, as Alexander makes clear in “the spirit of poetry”:

unfeeling poetry, cold-blooded poetry, that's  
what we want, to warm us, on a cold night  
something you can /////stuff in the chim  
something you can su  
something you can stuff in the chimney to  
keep the cold air out  
that is a spirit.

This is what the “spirits” want to warm themselves with. They are vampiric. They feed on the poet's blood, on the poet's life. I'm thinking of Spicer: “my vocabulary did this to me.” Notice how the poet stutters; the word “chim” is an incomplete reading by the poet of the alien message. The word then becomes

“chimney.” But “su” is a mistake; perhaps the poet meant “stu” for “stuff.” In this way the spooks play with the poet, in one case suggesting part of a word, and then completing it with the additional letters, and in another case, causing the poet to be misled into writing down a mistake. As a knight in the forest seeking the grail may lose his way. This is one of the risks of dictated poetry: the loss of control for the poet, where a mistake can prove fatal.

Dictated poetry requires the absence of any ego, the poet becoming like an empty vessel through which language passes on its way to the page. The goal is a poem purified of excess, ornamentation, the false, the writing down of “something in God-language.” But of course, the spirits of Mars are not always on the side of man and can just as easily intercept the “God-language,” and infect it with lies. Alexander cautions the poet:

parts of our live  
 ar not memorabl  
 tho we do not regres  
 nor lose track  
 of the engine  
 the train  
 or the passengers.

For Alexander, the poet/knight is steadfast in his search for the truth. He is no Lancelot in Spicer’s reading of the Grail Legend. Alexander writes

you can’t scare me with the terrible  
 the awful truth.....  
 it’s just a small forest, tree tonnage, and all that  
 yes, i can wield an ax, bow, and arrow. what?  
 the rebels are dirty you know  
 they live on hog cabbage  
 and take root in the hills.

The poet believes “in the silverness of my sword / my word of honor.”

Throughout his book, Alexander is keenly aware of the pitfalls of the poet in his search for truth: the lies, the games, the cruelty of men and women, and of private ownership, which leads to violence:

the indiscriminate destruction in warfare is automatically involved because of the destruction of the production places. only by acknowledgment of the most primitive truths will you oust the real enemy. Where actual properties are concerned defense of them is necessary. Right of ownership bears upon strength to maintain it... the needs of the body for the mind which watches over the body cannot ultimately conflict, but no sacrifice to sin is necessary.

Alexander speaks of the primitive truth which will destroy the enemy in society. His vision of freedom is more Dionysian than Apollonian. He has a pagan view of nature and of man's place in it. Perhaps this is why Spicer addressed Alexander in the guise of Apollo. For Alexander, the sense of bliss occurs outside an urban setting, in nature. *Eternature* = Eternity + Nature, a wavering light through eternity. He titled his poem on this subject, “honor”:

slept on the seashore  
swan in the sea  
ate wild honey, and loved her

hav you never looked at the trees as if they wer gesturing  
or seen the expressions of the waves  
the palaces of cloud

“this place, rumored to have been” lace, might have  
that place, rumored to have been new, might be

native, nativity, native to freedom.



relevant. That they did love each other absolutely is what is important. Furthermore, “som things ar not to be mentioned / som things / ar silent / your eyes.” Alexander realizes the inadequacy of language in describing the expression in his lover’s eyes.

Alexander’s poems also deal with essence, origin, the primitive truth:

to know where we are  
 draw from the resources  
 deeper than time, mysterious  
 suggestive but mysterious  
 corresponding and creating  
 resources that were not, now are  
 the possibility extended beyond us.

Here, the poet is concerned with the origin of ourselves, and our ability to come to a deeper understanding of our purpose on earth. He seeks to go beyond time, to read the “mysterious” and “suggestive” fragments of prehistoric cultures, in the belief that there is a sign there of a place, or knowledge of a way of life, that can allow us to better understand ourselves; becoming truly human is the goal; the danger, of course, is all around us: the corruption of money, the neglect of poetry, the mistreatment of those that are different from us.<sup>3</sup> In the following poem, Alexander suggests that our misunderstandings come from the language we use. It is also a commentary on the economics of being a poet:

did you get the loot  
 no but I got this lute, man  
 fuck the lute, man

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3 In the poem, “Peter Salt” Alexander writes of a childhood incident that led him to see that people are different. He writes, “i’m getting fed up / the roady o changes stations by itself / like the kid who used to kick up my sand castles / i hid on the roof and pelted him in the act / with apple seeds / he didn’t know what was happening but he said cut that out / this was a human being / there are differences in the world.”

how much loot did you get

In a world where everything rushes by so fast, where technology assumes such importance in people's lives that they forget their fellow human, it is harder and harder to live in the instant, to slow down and stop time, to experience the immediacy of events in the world:

the beauty of the immediate  
 i need all around me  
 immediately he said  
 don't jump to conclusions.

Here again, we have the contrary voice, the voice that undercuts the poet's voice, the ghost in the poem who says, "Not so fast, you might want to think about what you're saying." Elsewhere, Alexander speaks of the pain of thinking about an idea when there is no action. Ironically, "he" *immediately* responds to the poet. Beauty is undercut by the real. The spook reminds the poet of this "awful truth." But the poet knows that the important thing is

belief in the goodness of ourselves (not the errors)  
 and this is what should be instilled in doubtful children  
 fools go on and on but wise men never lie  
 that is the truth and not the definition  
 love is a great honor.

And addressing Virgil, Alexander writes, "you get tired of pessimism, threats, and verbage, Virgil, but you / dont go to sleep." In another poem, he echoes the same sentiment:

comebody asked me what some of this  
 stuf means  
 i guess it means you better make  
 sure you deserve to be a man  
 i don't mean feats of daring

i mean actually doing something.

In contrast to Alexander's words above, Spicer had reached a point of utter despair in the early sixties. Spicer, in 1963, writes, "Your life does not count. It is the rules of the tribe." And in a sense, he is absolutely right. The world was changing in the early sixties and the freedom that was coming was not something Spicer would have wanted or been comfortable with. And in this sense, his mistrust of the world that he saw coming proved prophetic. On the other hand, Alexander, as I suggested in the beginning, came to a different conclusion. What matters is not to give up and to continue to "do things," to continue to write, for example, if you are a writer. For him this is showing that "you deserve to be a man," the stakes are that high. His "advice" is "begin with purity, and love / and learn to live, a sensible way / begin to learn out of the deep shadows that draw forth / out of the silence of time." But he is also aware that the "rules of the tribe" will continue to exert their pressure on the poet in a different sense. This is why the poet must be committed to his art. The figures of authority in the "castle" will continue to haunt the poet. This is why he must be careful and listen to the "pure music." Spicer was also aware that there were bosses in poetry just like in any other job.<sup>4</sup> In a poem called, "Commitment" written for H.D., Alexander writes,

we don't escape, we show off, but we don't escape  
the dungeons are too high, the castle in the wall  
will go on writing poetry, the same as you and i  
in a different sense.

Spicer, and in different sense, Nerval, were called to suffer a different fate, to follow a different star into the darkness of oblivion.

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4 The following is Alexander's response to the bosses of poetry: "what you want / the right tune / i never sang before / but I'll say this / i've sung."

on. And some can even lose their humanity in the process. But as far as Alexander's muse is concerned, he writes,

naturally we are in love  
 it requires no poetry  
 no sentence to death of anything

If she were his lover, the above would also be true.

Alexander does not fall into the trap of those who believe "my kingdom is not of this world." His retort to that statement is: "isn't there some harmony of souls that refutes that?" He wonders "what possesses men to defy each other ... good acts upon evil successfully because it is good ... the kingdom of the devil is of this world while hell is unfortunate." Can politics solve the world's problems? The poet answers,

Surely all things can be solved politically  
 The scorns that brood and breed in darkness  
 Can be light-changed  
 Surely there is enough for all  
 And brotherliness.

In these present times, when the country, and indeed the world almost, has veered to the Right in its politics, such words seem to point to a more ideal past, of a socially conscious poetry, that began in the sixties. But it sometimes seems as though the "scorns that brood and breed in darkness" have won the battle waged on the spiritual level between light and darkness, and the light has receded back into the darkness. The poet's work is concerned with "the comedy of divine hell" and above all "the discovery of the universe," the "human universe." To this extent, Alexander is a metaphysical poet.<sup>5</sup> He expresses his discontent

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5 In alchemy, and the metaphysical poet is a kind of alchemist, the light must be produced from the darkness, that is, one must be a master of both. Alexander speaks about this kind of work in the following poem: "it was way down / in old shanty town / about have past dark / a littl boy and girl was playin with de dark / witches books and lots of candles / keep those candles burnin /so I can see the page." The magician must also learn to

about the world in this way: “the cataracts of disgust ringall my brow / browsing the hills of veritable desert / my kingdom is not of this sandheap” but of the “summer lightning.”

In the Appendix, Alexander writes, “i am just in my distribution; fair in my appraisals; outspoken in my actions; human in my endeavor; religious in my conviction.” But to be sexually free, in a sense, is also a kind of revolutionary act, against the masters. To take ownership of own’s own body is an act of freedom. It is perhaps the only remaining freedom we have in a society that more and more resembles Foucault’s panopticon:

go jack off in a corner of the world  
 if you can take all that nature  
 go jack off in a corner of San Francisco  
 which has about as much to do with St Francis as bird shit  
 “the mastrs ar baiting their pupils.”

Sadly, for Alexander, the brotherly love espoused by St. Francis has nothing to do with the situation in San Francisco at the time he was writing. The connection to the spiritual light was broken. Alexander speaks of the wild west, now become commercialized with “hollywood,” and “lost angels, and kids.” Los Angeles becomes “lost angels,” a city of dispossessed kids who are in danger of never being taught the difference between good and evil. For Alexander “politics” is linked to a metaphysics. He is not a Kenneth Rexroth, or Amiri Baraka. For Alexander, it is about the light, the wave that undulates through eternity, the transformative aspect of poetry, such that these “scorns” may be “light-changed” into positive qualities. This is the “God-language” Spicer spoke of, the pure music, instead of “all this horseshit, this uncomfortable music.”

I would like to close with the following excerpt from the Appendix to Eturnature since it sets a high moral standard for a

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control the spirits of the poetry: “weird poem, way out poem, show em what we can do . . . for them.”

poet's life in this time or any other. It is also as close to a poetics that we have from Alexander:

I am a servant of beauty and an opponent of evil; neither do i understand my life; i will go as far as i can in any direction. i will pronounce sentence on some, blame on others, censor on most. my critics are as the seeds of discontent ... their value is relative ... my value is absolute. abstraction will be used to describe: art will be used to inform. this is a work of art ... and not of anything. no man may judge it ... because he will not be interested in it as finalities. editions will fail ... there is only one poem. there is a vast contribution that will enable all to hear. there is an endurance that will enable all. and there is peace at the end of it. read it then as you would poetry ... knowing and feeling. it is all there is to my life.

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## Thoughts after Reading Michael Franco's *A Book of Measure*

*The Mind at work, that's what I want on my pages.*

Michael Franco's *A Book of Measure, Volume 1* is a contemporary bildungsroman of the poet's life in late Capitalism, a search for self-knowledge that involves a spiritual awakening through writing, travel, and friendships. Such knowledge is achieved through a slow accumulation of moments in time and space, and a refining of perception, where, like Proust, memory plays a central role: "all I do is remember or prepare to remember. some days I beg sleep to come and rock me with its promise. each day each person lingers like a remnant Dream that in waking has wrapt its transient arms around my abilities." The book is a map of the inner worlds of the poet, both real and imaginary. It is a collage-work in which the parts of differing realities and experiences, suggest a whole life. The poet charts the geography of both a physical and a psychic space. The process of writing cannot be rushed, failure and indecision are part of the search. Sra. Maria Torres writes, "thus the great cycle of failure would begin each day anew. Even as I attempted to untie the knots and tangles of the previous day's thoughts I would be presented with new shimmering fragments of information."

And there are, amidst failures, also moments of illumination, which are often accompanied by a greater sense of one's inclusion in a tradition and not merely a literary tradition. During these moments, there is a greater realization that there is a continuity, even with the different experiences that exists among men and women, as proof of our common humanity. Such a moment causes the poet to pause. The poet writes, "in that moment of hesitation I find my thoughts constantly drawn from their path and at once, I am standing with all of those who have passed here; my thoughts then mingling with what is of course no more than the lingering aroma of theirs ... what I see, they saw." Subjectivity, the feeling that one is the center of the world, gives over to a wider sense of the human community. The poet's journey is a search for his personal language, a learning how to speak in his own voice, which involves looking, a learning to see, and accessing that which is hidden in ourselves, but which often refuses to come to the surface. It cannot be realized by following a linear path. To assume "a beginning middle and end as constant is a false model of time. a reality yes but not work-a-day or normal shall we say reality." On the writing process, he writes, "I find my writing to be more like the streets of a town: perpetually winding inviting me to become lost (always at a moment at which I can seemingly least afford to be so). Yet with each occasion, from each event in which I find myself 'lost,' the story of my life, the story of a life occurs. this occurrence not unlike a dry field, which after the first rains come seems to spring to life." In a very real sense, there is nothing to know, no end to the journey, but in searching, even losing our way, which is inevitable, for there is no map of the territory, there is the moment of the poem when a dry field (the silent white of the page) after the rains (I think of tears, of the requisite suffering) results in flowers blooming (the poem). And here imagination is tantamount: "for myself, my sea was the imagination: And from this imagination, having cast the net of myself upon it, I would attempt to haul in any living moment that might carry me forward into the next day. (Which has now become the next

year!)” I am thinking of Jung and the collective unconscious here, the wider field of human experience and myth, that resides within us all, this wide sea upon which the poet voyages, accumulating moments, in his “science of *here*,” which are proof of his existence in a larger community, and that the poet gives voice to in his work. These are special moments in life when we are no longer strangers to ourselves, and these moments are often the result of encounters with others, friends living or dead, the imaginary or real. As we grow in self knowledge and experience, “there is almost no need for metaphysics. everything speaks.” This is the poet as Orpheus. The poet writes, “I had become we.” Here the ego breaks down, “I is an other,” different but the same. The poet writes,

form in form in incorporated formal possibilities or tendencies to being or — does this fire carve me for its use — confluence of cells conglomerate structure moving to descry recognition. each part connected to the whole each whole the sum of its parts. each part potentially greater than any conceivable rendering of the whole. meaning then no more no less than looking.

This is a looking out into the world, a being in the wider space that is inclusive, looking as a kind of knowing which is different from acquired knowledge, and more fluid and changeable. He continues, “I was now again no more than two eyes moving up the street. the entire world moving around and in me.” The limits of subjective experience are apparent and transcended, there is a movement toward the outside, the I has become we. These moments where we clearly see our position in relation to others and the world are transitory, but to say this is not to in any way diminish their importance. They linger in memory and change our perception in a fundamental way. The experience is something felt rather than intellectualized. In fact, the poet writes of his being, “possessed by all of the world that I did not see, let alone that which I did not know to exist.” This way of knowing is apophatic; the poet finds a concept like “eternity” limiting

and is here speaking of a transcendence which defies rational explanation. The failures of this search are numerous, the rewards life-altering. And there is Franco's care and attention to the line, his rhythm, and pacing; his ear attuned to the sounds of the quotidian and the celestial. *A Book of Measure* charts the journey every poet must make, reminding us that the world is filled with marvels if only we would *listen*, and that no challenge must discourage us, despite failure, from moving forward in our search to find our place in the cosmos.

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## Brief Notes on Thomas McEvilley

### 1. The Shape of Ancient Thought and The Arimaspia

*Pan neglected his / leaping and sang / the odes of / Pindar.*

In *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, Thomas McEvilley notes there had been important similarities between the thought of India and Greece in the Ancient world. One reason for this is that both were profoundly affected by the Bronze Age civilizations of the Ancient Near East, especially Mesopotamia. Under the Persian Empire (roughly the sixth century BCE), there was an important transmission of ideas from Northwestern India to Eastern Greece (part of present-day Turkey/Western Anatolia). These ideas included reincarnation, a cyclical view of time, and the idea of monism. Pre-Socratic thought, the central philosophical movement at the heart of Western Civilization, was essentially brought over from India and based on these ideas. Later, during the reign of Alexander (the fourth century BCE), this transmission occurred in reverse. Now Greek thought, carrying with it the advanced ideas of the dialectic, of reason, and logic, began to influence thought in India. The radical view in *The Shape of Ancient Thought* is that this significant exchange of ideas between East and West, which occurred for many centuries and showed that the origins of Greco-Roman culture were non-Western, was repressed in favor of a Western bias.

In McEville's novel, *The Arimaspia*, a Greek scholar is travelling to India in order "to unite East and West in a megaculture that would combine, and yet somehow separately preserve, the best of all its parts." He discovers the challenges of such a product. On arriving in India, he encounters Megasthenes,<sup>1</sup> who believed that the Indians were "better in deed than in word," and that their "opinions indicate mental simplicity." Such ideas resulted in what the narrator sees as part of Megasthenes's racist projection: "that dark-skinned peoples can't deal with abstraction, that they are associated with the instincts, and so on." Our Greek scholar also discovers the influence of Indian thought upon Greek thought:

Even then they speak of nothing so much as of death, for they say that the life here is as it were that of a babe still in the womb, and that death, to those who have devoted themselves to philosophy, is birth into true life, and that they discipline themselves above all to be prepared for death. (This was the Orphic line too. Socrates is said to have remarked that philosophy was "practicing death.")

While reading an Indian text, he notes the expression of Western ideas mixed with a form that is distinctly Eastern. He describes the text as "unrolling inexorably the ancient story of war and betrayal that reminds me of the Homeric tales except for its narrative form, which seems pluralistic and shapeless. Aristotle would never accept it: no clear beginning, middle, and end." Furthermore, he feels surrounded by a "big emptiness" that cannot be "surrounded or embraced in a framework which could give it meaning, because such a framework would just become the next boundary of the finite and be in turn surrounded by the big emptiness." The concept of "zero" or *sunyam* origi-

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1 Megasthenes (350–c. 290 BCE) was an ancient Greek historian and ethnographer of India during the Hellenistic period. He described his findings in India in a book called *Indika*, which has been lost but partially reconstructed based on the writings of later authors.

nated in ancient India. It was derived from the concept of “void” or *śūnyatā* propagated by Nāgārjuna<sup>2</sup> in his work *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*. Our Greek scholar comes up against the limits of reason. But his project of “establishing a philosophy school in India and fomenting a synthesis of Greek and Indian thought” is an attempt to establish global harmony.

Such attempts to acknowledge the Eastern influence upon the West were repressed over time as a result of racist ideas during the colonial period, primarily of the British agenda. Instead the West was seen as the home of rational positivism and the East as mystical and irrational, thus inferior and superstitious. When Percy Bysshe Shelley writes, “We are all Greeks,” he specifically means the West, the Greco-Roman culture. Thus, the East and West have always been seen as distinct. In the East, China and Japan were dependent on Indian origins, but in the West, the Greco-Roman civilization has been seen, due to colonial project, as the sole culture responsible for the origin of Civilization, and thus superior to all other cultures. Speaking about *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, McEvilley tells us that in 1786, at the height of the Colonial period, there was a man named Sir William Jones, who gave a lecture in which he stated that Sanskrit was an Indo-European language. This struck at the heart of the British agenda. If Sanskrit was understood to be the oldest of the Indo-European languages, that would topple the supremacy of the Western linguistic bias. But his views were ignored.

In our time, this colonial agenda is disguised as a progressive movement for the people, one that leads to the demonization of Islamic culture and immigrants in general, nationalism, and white supremacy. But, despite this, and as a result of technology and the changing face of our culture and the world, the spread of nationalism is challenged. In such a political environment, translation becomes increasingly important. Today educated children are fluent in at least two if not more languages. Many translations from Farsi, Arabic, Turkish, and other non-Western

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2 Little is known of his life. He was born Hindu, which, during his time (c. 150–c. 250 CE), meant a religious allegiance to the Vedas.

languages are being published. The primacy of English is called into question.

## 2. Translations

My first encounter with McEvilley's work was through his translations from the Greek. During the time, I was also working in the same territory, producing translations of Catullus, Lucretius, Ovid, Martial, and others, in an attempt to show how foreign the value system of the Ancient world is to our own, and to reveal certain cultural forces at work in our time. At the center of the project was a reconsideration of sexuality in the pre-Judeo-Christian world. Here is McEvilley's transcreation of the Epicurean Philodemus's (c. 110–35 BCE) poem, "Philodemus Reforms":

I want no more garlands of white violets, no more lyre-  
 playing  
 No more wine with cocaine in it, no more Syrian incense  
 burning on the nighttable,  
 No more all night parties that end with a thirsty whore in  
 my bed —  
 No more! I hate these things; they are all driving me mad!

But — give me garlands of narcissus flowers, and let me play  
 the flute,  
 Perfume me with saffron, give me wine with amphetamines  
 and hashish,  
 And mate me, yes mate me, with a virrrgin.

It is an interesting poem in several respects. Epicurus believed that what he called "pleasure" was the greatest good, but that the way to attain such pleasure was to live modestly, to gain knowledge of the workings of the world, and to limit one's desires. This would lead one to attain a state of tranquility and freedom from fear as well as an absence of bodily pain. Of course, this is

by no means a hedonistic philosophy, though it speaks of “pleasure” as the ultimate good. The similarity of this thought with certain Buddhist doctrines on sexuality and restraint is striking: “This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, that it should not be feared.”<sup>3</sup> Philodemus is exchanging one kind of pleasure for another by renouncing the “lyre-playing” for the flute, choosing wine with hashish and amphetamines instead of cocaine, renouncing the “Syrian incense” to be perfumed with saffron. Perhaps the “flute” suggests the syrinx of Pan. Many modern scholars consider Pan to be derived from a proto-Indo-European god, whom they believe to have been an important pastoral deity. The Rigvedic<sup>4</sup> god, Pushan, is believed to be an earlier form of the Greek god, Pan. Amphetamines and cocaine are both stimulants whose effects are similar. But hashish, a word that comes from Arabic, meaning “grass,” suggests the East. As trade between India and the Greco-Roman world increased spices became the main import along the spice routes from India to the Western world, rivaling silk and other commodities. Ancient Greeks and Romans valued saffron as a perfume or deodorizer that they scattered in public spaces such as the courts and amphitheatres. Wealthy Romans took daily saffron baths. In this poem, there is a mixture of Eastern and Western influences. In the last line of the poem, Philodemus makes it clear that he wants a “virrrgin” and not a whore for a wife: “And mate me, yes mate me, with a *virrrgin* [my emphasis].” McEvilley’s poetic license with the spelling of the word “virgin” is significant since it expresses excitement while also pointing to the fact of his “reformation.” It is generally accepted that Hellenistic culture in general, and Hellenistic philosophy in particular, have influenced early Christian thought. And the writings of Philodemus, as well as the Epicurean philosophers, have played a significant

3 Ven Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of the Buddha’s words in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 557.

4 The *Rigveda* is an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns.

role. For this reason, I read a tension between the “virrrgin” of the poem and the “virgin” of Christianity which will eventually be resolved in a crystallizing moment when the West asserts its power and taking the form of the Christian religion casts away the East as though it were exorcising a demon. With Christianity’s subsequent dominance over the West, the project of neglect and repression of Eastern thought was virtually complete.

In the *Arimaspia*, McEvilley appropriates many texts from the Ancient world, and one that is used extensively is Philostratus’s *Imagines*. I imagine this text was important to him since it is in a way a kind of Ancient art criticism, and McEvilley himself was a well know art critic. In the *Imagines*, Philostratus describes to a young boy a series of paintings. I have translated these texts and reading McEvilley’s *The Shape of Ancient Thought* has made me aware of certain important cultural aspects and forces at work. The following text concerns a painting of Themistocles and is of particular interest here. Themistocles (c. 524–459 BCE) was an Athenian politician and general. Plutarch describes him as “the man most instrumental in achieving the salvation of Greece” from the Persian threat. Here is my translation:

### 31. THEMISTOCLES

Here is a Greek, and we can tell by his rough cloak that he is an Athenian, and he is among these barbarians, these men who are degenerates and whose lives are ruined, and I imagine he addresses them with some wise words, in an attempt to have them see the error of their ways and to urge them to give up their luxuries and their decadent way of life. We are in the center of Babylon and these are Medes; notice their royal standard which is a golden eagle upon a shield, and here is a king on his throne, elaborately adorned in many vibrant colors, shimmering like a peacock. Now the painter’s fine depiction of a tiara and a tasseled cloak or a jacket with sleeves or even the grotesque forms of animals that these barbarians decorate their clothes with, fine as these representations are, more deserving of our praise is the painter’s

use of these golden threads woven into the cloth and how he has preserved the specific design of the garment which contains them, and also, by Zeus, the way in which he painted the faces of these eunuchs. Of course, the palace is also made of gold, indeed, the accuracy with which the painter depicts his subject makes the painting seem unlike a painting at all; the palace seems like an actual building and you can smell the fragrance of frankincense and myrrh, for it is the habit of these barbarians to pollute the clean air and thus clog the passage of the wind. Now let us imagine a man, carrying a spear, who is talking to another man about this Greek, while looking at him with wonder, having heard in part about his great achievements. Now I think that Themistocles, son of Neocles, arrived in Babylon from Athens, after the immortal triumph at Salamis, because he did not know the best place in Greece to be safe; imagine him talking with the king about how he aided Xerxes while he was in command of the Greek army. These Median people surrounding him do not disturb his peace of mind at all, instead, he is as courageous and as bold as he would be if he was standing on a podium about to give a speech; the language he speaks is unfamiliar to us, but Themistocles is fluent in this Median tongue which he learned with great difficulty in that land. If you doubt his proficiency in this language just look at how closely these barbarians listen to him, how their eyes acknowledge the words he is using and indicate that they do understand him without effort, and look at Themistocles, how he holds his head up high like an orator addressing the people; notice also that he is somewhat hesitant when he speaks, though his eyes express his contemplative nature, and this is because the language is new to him and he learned it only recently.

Notice the repeated use of the word barbarian (βάρβαρος) to describe the Medes, who were an ancient Iranian people living in an area known as Media (northwestern Iran) and who spoke the ancient Median language. They are described as “degenerates ... whose lives are ruined.” And Philostratus imagines Themisto-

cles addressing them “with some wise words, in an attempt to have them see the error of their ways and to urge them to give up their luxuries and their decadent way of life.” It is a mission to civilize and dominate the “barbarian.” Furthermore, he writes, “you can smell the fragrance of frankincense and myrrh, for it is the habit of these barbarians to pollute the clean air and thus clog the passage of the wind.” Philostratus continues, “Now let us imagine a man, carrying a spear, who is talking to another man about this Greek, while looking at him with wonder, having heard in part about his great achievements.” Themistocles is fluent in the language of the Medians and uses his authority, as an educated Greek, to dominate them and assert his superiority over them. My own examination of certain Ancient texts shows the subtle ways that Western culture dominated those cultures which were foreign to it, bending what they encountered or saw to emphasize their superiority over the East.

### 3. Conclusion

Thomas McEvelley’s monumental study *The Shape of Ancient Thought* and his novel *The Arimaspia* have much to tell us about a world where the free exchange of ideas was valued and fruitful. In our present world, as democracy faces challenges unheard of in previous generations, his work can provide a kind of map of a possible alternative way of being in the world, one where difference is accepted, not merely tolerated, and where there is conversation and the open exchange of ideas, rather than the present polarization which creates walls and breeds hatred of foreigners. Even in our present world of globalization it is illuminating to read in *The Arimaspia* that though “the idea of global harmony can be a transparent excuse for imperialism ... it once had a great ring that is not yet gone altogether.” Translation is of vital importance in our time and is one way of bringing over ideas that are non-Western, so as to examine cultures outside the one you were born in, and thus create a dialogue. Such a dialogue is crucial and the essence of our democracy. We ignore McEvelley’s work at our own peril.

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## Robert Browning's "Sordello"

### A Moral Epic for Poets

*He sleeps, the feverish poet.*

In his epic poem "Sordello," a masterpiece of psychological and linguistic complexity, Robert Browning explores in detail some things he himself at the time was struggling with as a poet, that is, the poet's duty to himself, his fellow man, and his art. He also explores the errors and pitfalls of a poet's life as he searches for an identity and a means to embody it in the poem. In many ways, *Sordello*, the minor, thirteenth-century Troubadour, mirrors Browning's own self. For the poet, with the emergence of a concept of the self comes a determination of its relation to the outside world, and the finding of an audience for his poems, as well as a concern over their reception. In the first book, Browning, after beginning the poem with an invocation of the various poets of the past, including Shelley and Sidney, begins to trace the emergence of the soul of the poet. This is how Browning initially introduces the reader to *Sordello*:

Look, now he turns away! Yourselves shall trace  
 (the delicate nostril swerving wide and fine,  
 A sharp and restless lip, so well combine

What that calm brow) a soul fit to receive  
 Delight at every sense; you can believe  
 Sordello foremost in the regal class  
 Nature has broadly severed from her mass  
 Of men, and framed for pleasure, as she frames  
 Some happy lands, that have luxurious names,  
 For loose fertility.

It is significant that we encounter Sordello turning away from us, the readers, which suggests a kind of insecurity on his part, even shyness. Sordello is described as someone who has the *appearance* of being from “the regal class” and belonging to those men, “framed for pleasure” like those “happy lands, that have luxurious names.” But this “appearance” is complicated by the fact of his lowly birth. Sordello, against the fate prescribed by his birth, intends to “laugh” at it and “soar to heaven’s completest essence, rife / With grandeurs, unaffronted to the last, / Equal to being all!”

We find him alone, wandering the various halls of a castle in the region of Goito. Here, he lives in a world of dreams, where he is the architect of each fantasy, and where doubt cannot intrude since he is, “so fenced about / From most that nurtures judgement, — care and pain.” In the absence of any relation to real life, or any experience of real pain or joy, he has no reason to question his own dreams or to measure them against a sense of the real. In such a case, the aesthete is born; he who lives divorced from any concerns about the outside world, living in a fantasy land completely under his control. And thus, vanity is inherent in such men as Sordello:

Souls like Sordello ...  
 Coerced and put to shame, retaining will,  
 Care little, take mysterious comfort still,  
 But look forth tremblingly to ascertain  
 If others judge their claims not urged in vain,  
 And say for them their stifled thoughts aloud.

So, they must ever live before a crowd.

With no way in which to measure his own worth, he looks forward, "tremblingly" to seek out the judgement of others, an audience to validate his own sense of himself. He is soon bored with his bucolic surroundings and begins to fantasize about his position in the world by studying the characteristics of those he believes are noble and strong. He "Betakes himself to study hungrily /

Just what the puppets his crude phantasy / Supposes notablest, — popes, kings, priests, knights" Of course, his crude phantasies cannot offer realistic portraits of these figures of strength to counter his own weak sense of a self. His only interaction with something outside himself, alone in the castle, has been with statues of women, whom he imagines, "like priestesses because of sin impure / Penanced for ever, who reigned endure, / having once drunk sweetness to the dregs." Each night he "begs pardon for them." Like a hierophant, Sordello absolves the "noiseless girls" of their imagined sin of excessive desire. Perhaps Sordello is imagining the repentance of a desire that lies repressed inside himself, and about which he is barely conscious. At this point his desires cannot find an outlet.

The soul of the poet emerges as he imagines himself in the world with a desire to realize his dreams. But Sordello's desire is not for self-actualization but rather to acquire fame and power. In order to do this, he must embody his thoughts in action, otherwise they remain the stuff of dreams:

'Tis beside  
 Only a dream; and though I must abide  
 With dreams now, I may find a thorough vent  
 For all myself, acquire an instrument  
 For acting what these people act; my soul  
 Hunting a body out may gain its whole  
 Desire some day!

Sordello believes this embodiment of his soul in action will lead to the full realization of his repressed desires. So he adopts a suitable name: Apollo, a name synonymous with human perfection, which for him means the realization of his full potential.

He finds a chance to test his power as a poet in a competition with Eglamor, the elderly distinguished poet. Surprisingly, Sordello wins the prize and dethrones him, who, overcome with envy and spite dies soon after. Browning describes the competition in the following way:

On flew the song, a giddy race,  
 After the flying story; word mad leap  
 Out word, rhyme — rhyme; the lay could barely keep  
 Pace with the action visibly running past:  
 Both ended.

His friend and companion, Naddo, is aghast: Sordello has won! Perhaps Naddo knows something about Sordello's disposition that Sordello is unaware of and that is why he is "aghast." As a result of his victory, he wins the love of Palm, and becomes her minstrel. She places her scarf around his neck, "speaking some six words and no more. / He answered something, anything." Sordello receives from this a validation of his self-worth from the world. It helps him, "to find / A beauty in himself,"

for, see, he soared  
 By means of that mere snatch, to many a hoard  
 Of fancies; as some falling cone bears soft  
 The eye along the fir-tree-spire, aloft  
 To a dove's nest.

His imagination soars in his new-found confidence about himself and his poem. This poem, which Browning describes as "a snatch," a merely good poem, in Sordello's mind, becomes something more, something that leads to fantasies which inflame his mind about his own sense of himself. But this feeling

cannot last since it is born of vanity rather than genuine confidence. Browning describes the problem in this way:

So distinct and far above  
 Himself, these fancies! He, no genius rare,  
 Transfiguring in fire or wave or air  
 At will, but a poor gnome that, cloistered up  
 In some rock-chamber with his agate cup,  
 His topaz rod, his seed-pearl, in these few  
 And their arrangement finds enough to do  
 For his best art. Then, how he loved that art!  
 Him with his hopes and fears; so fain of old  
 To leave the story of his birth untold.

Like an aesthete, trapped in a fantasy world, with his "agate cup," his "topaz rod," his "seed-pearl," his art is just like those beautiful objects he is surrounded by, like those "noiseless girls" in his castle; he lives in a rarefied and privileged environment of his own creation and so his art lacks the life blood of reality. And so, in this false paradise "spite the fantastic glow / Of his Apollon-life," he hears "a certain low / And wretched whisper, winding through the bliss, / Admonished, no such fortune could be his, / All was quite false and sure to fade one day." He remains unsure of himself and questions his vocation as a poet to the extent that his dreams seem to fade. "In short, / Apollo vanished," and Sor-dello, emotionally ill-equipped to confront reality, must choose an alternative.

But he is impatient; instead, he is "Content with unproved wits and failing frame, / In virtue of his simple will, to claim / that mastery such dreams allot, / no less — to do his best / with means so limited, and let the rest / Go by, — the seal was set." Nevertheless, he holds on to what remains of his fantasy world. He will now fashion a poetry that will please the crowds. He is unable to do anything else. His identity has not been fully realized and he continues to be informed by the will of the people. It is they who dictate what he will write since he is unable to express anything inside himself:

Be mine mere consciousness! Let men perceive  
 What I could do, a mastery believe,  
 Asserted and established to the throng  
 By their selected evidence of song  
 Which now shall prove, whate'er they are, or seek  
 To be, I am — whose words, not actions speak,  
 Who change no standards of perfection, vex  
 With no strange forms created to perplex,  
 But just perform their bidding and no more,  
 At their own satiating-point give o'er,  
 While each shall love in me the love that leads  
 His soul to power's perfection. Song, not deeds,  
 (for we get tired) was chosen.

Words, not action. But he realized that previously he had welded “words into the crude / mass from the new speech round him, till a rude / Armour was hammered out”: such a poetry is insincere; it is like an “armour” around his desire; he is unable to freely express himself. He seeks a new language, a different kind of poem. Browning describes Sordello’s struggle, similar to his own:

Piece after piece that armour broke away,  
 Because perceptions whole, like that he sought  
 To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought  
 As language: thought may take perception's place  
 But hardly co-exist in any case,  
 Being its mere presentment — of the whole  
 By parts, the simultaneous and the sole  
 By the successive and the many. Lacks  
 The crowd perception?

This new kind of poetry is colloquial and metaphysical, complex, dissonant; but it proves unpopular with the people.<sup>1</sup> Sor-

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1 Browning himself faced a backlash when Sordello was published in 1840. He had initially described the poem, before its publication, as “popular.” In

dello is disappointed and realizes that he had "strewed / A fairy dust upon that multitude," while feigning, "to take them by themselves." He had "Sublimed their faint applause." Sordello's victory in the competition with Elgamor begins to lose its importance in his life as he realizes how fickle the tastes of the public are. Having sought validation and possibly assistance from the public for his work, he is now disillusioned and unsure of what to do next, feeling "Remote as ever from the self-display / He meant to compass, / hampered every way / by what he hoped assistance." He wonders, "Wherefore then / Continue, make believe to find in men / A use he found not." His work has met with disapproval from the public, but the fault is his own. His attempt to garner such praise in order to feel validated was the source of his error.

The poet now, after having lived in a world of fantasy and encountered the world with unrealistic desires, has no choice but to "vanish utterly" into his solitude, having been "Sundered in twain; each spectral part at strife / With each; one jarred against another life; / The Poet thwarting hopelessly the Man / Who sauntered forth in dream,"

Dressed any how, nor waited mystic frames,  
Immeasurable gifts, astounding claims,  
But just his sorry self?

Sordello now has to face himself, stripped of appearances, "mystic frames," and "immeasurable gifts" and finds in the absence of these trappings, "just his sorry self." As a poet, he dwelled in the world of dreams and fancies, such that his life is now in conflict with the life of a man of action; as Sordello the Man, he was in conflict with Sordello the Poet. So Sordello's "soul, / Unequal to

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Book Three of *Sordello*, Browning enters the poem and writes the following to his readers: "Still, neither misconceive my portraiture / Nor undervalue its adornments to allure; / What seems a fiend perchance may prove a saint. / Ponder a story ancient pens transmit, / Then say if you condemn me or acquit."

the compassing a whole, / Saw, in a tenth part, less and less to strive / About.”

Nevertheless, Sordello decides to seek a place in the world. He has given up on poetry, “He lost the art of dreaming.” He desires now to create a relation to the world as a man of action. He contemplates his present situation. Before, he was “Hand-somely reckless, full to running-o'er / Of gallantries; ‘abjure the soul, content / With body, therefore!’” Now thinking about the soul, he realizes, “To balance ethereality, / Passions were needed; foiled he sank again.” Unable to experience real passions as a man of action, he is unable to balance the ethereal desires that were growing in him as he fantasied while wandering alone in the castle. But, “The Body, the Machine for Acting Will, / Had been at the commencement proved unfit; / That for Demonstrating, Reflecting it, / Mankind — no fitter: was the Will / Itself / In fault?” He questions his will, his ability to actualize his desires and becomes disillusioned with the world. He returns to his statues, those “noiseless girls,” and pressing his forehead on the “moonlit shelf / Beside the youngest marble maid awhile; / ‘I shall be king again!’ as he withdrew / The envied scarf; into the font he threw / His crown.” His desire to be recognized as a poet by the crowd and, even though he won the competition, was vain and narcissistic, and motivated by fame and power. Thus he could not be satisfied even though he defeated Elgamor. Such a defeat, and with Elgamor’s death, simply reminded him that all things pass in time, and as his desire was for a greatness, fed by his dreams, which would prove eternal, he substituted his idea of the poet for that of the hero.

And so, Sordello must forsake his past intentions as false: “A dream is o'er, / And the suspended life begins anew.” His experience as a poet taught him that it is better to “be unrevealed / than part revealed.” He could not resolve the dichotomy of the Man and the Bard, and, exhibiting his preference for one, he abjures the other. And the world in response to his neglect, rushes in: “How eyes, once with exploring bright, grew dim / and satiate with receiving” and “nature’s and his youth gone, / They left the world to you, / and wished you joy.”

In conversation with his lover, Palma, Sordello critically reflects on his youth, when he believed he could exchange ignorance for knowledge, and

Could e'en have penetrated to its core  
 Our mortal mystery, yet — fool — forbore,  
 Preferred elaborating in the dark  
 My casual stuff, by any wretched spark  
 Born of my predecessors, though one stroke  
 Of mine had brought the flame forth!

What kept Sordello from fully realizing his potential as a poet was perhaps that repressed desire I spoke of in relation to the statues. Even in the above passage he is partly blind to his vanity and arrogance.

But, nevertheless, as a man of action he advances forward with the people in mind, wondering first how to make the people happy. His project is now, as one of the people, himself, to manage the people. He invokes in his mind the Pope and the Emperor, but in effect,

Sordello only cared to know  
 About men as a means whereby he'd show  
 Himself, and men had much or little worth  
 According as they kept in or drew forth  
 That self.

Others think Sordello shallow in this regard. He is unable to account for the differences he sees between the people and himself, his own exalted position. Thusly he imagines the people as belonging to a City of God, where Christianity would be the unifying religion, where Rome would be, "the point of light whence rays / traversed the world." This vision of a united people under the Pope in Rome was just the extension of a dream to give "his thought consistency among / The very people." It is simply another dream and "proud conception" that fails to materialize. But Sordello doesn't realize the false path he's on

yet and fails to read “the black writing — that collective man / outstrips the individual.” And furthermore, that there is no such thing as a “whole and perfect Poet.” At last Browning writes,

All’s at an end: A Troubadour suppose  
 Mankind will class him with their friends or foes?  
 A puny uncouth ailing vassal think  
 The world and him bound in some special link?  
 Abrupt the visionary tether bust.

In a tense moment of indecision about his future, he gives a reading and something incredible happens: “what was stored / bit by bit through Sordello’s life, outpoured / That eve, was, for that age, a novel thing.” Something breaks through in Sordello’s writing, an emotion long repressed, and he becomes expressive, creating a “novel thing” for the age. Around him, “the People formed a ring / of visionary judges whose award / He recognized in full.” Browning writes about Sordello’s reading: “A reason why the phrases flowed so fast / Was in his quite forgetting for a time / Himself in amazement.” Sordello is a success, “the sad walls of the presence-chamber died into the distance” and “crowds of faces . . . deep clustered round / Sordello, with good wishes.” He finally realizes the mistake of his “past career’s outrageous vanity” and finds support in the People. “The singer’s life” was no longer “neath / The life his song exhibits” but equal to it.

Sordello is also given the Imperial emblem and becomes the head of the House of Romano. But it is not enough, and he throws it onto the floor, and with that comes a final illumination:

I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel;  
 So much is truth to me. What Is then? Since  
 One object, viewed diversely, may evince  
 Beauty and ugliness — this way attract,  
 That way repel, — why gloze upon the fact?

Why must a single of the sides be right?  
Where's abstract Right for me?

That is his final thought on politics, on the situation between the Guef and the Ghibellines, Rome and the Emperor. Confronted with the complex political situation in Italy between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines Sordello says, "What, it comes to pass / That poesy, sooner than politics, / Makes fade young hair." Browning writes, "the sudden swell / of his expanding soul showed Ill and Well, Sorrow and Joy, Beauty and Ugliness, Virtue and Vice, the Larger and the Less." It is a transcendent moment for the poet. But suddenly Sordello, at the end of his life, finds himself alone, "quite out of Time and this world: all was known." He has done all he could and in the end is able to express himself and exhibit his true worth to the people.

Browning concludes Sordello's life with a series of metaphysical statements and questions: "A sphere is but a sphere; / Small, Great, are merely terms we bandy here; / Since to the spirit's absoluteness all / are alike." Though difference is perceivable in human terms, we are all alike from the perspective of the Absolute. He continues, "But does our knowledge reach / No farther? Is the cloud of hindrance broke / but by the failing of the fleshly yoke, / Its loves and hates, as now when death lets soar / Sordello, self-sufficient as before, / though during the mere space that shall elapse / 'Twixt his enthrallment in new bonds perhaps?" Knowledge cannot go any further and halts before the idea of the Divine, or the afterlife. At that point questions cease to have answers. Life thus appears a "sorry farce."

At a point of utter despair, dissatisfied with his poetry, and unable to realize his vision of a City of God in which the people were unified under Christianity, Sordello's despair turns to bliss, the poem is suddenly realized, he is able to feel, and with that comes an outpouring of language. He is finally able to write an unselfconscious poetry, not indebted to what others expected of him, but that emerged from deep inside himself. His world of fantasy has shown itself a false paradise, and his entry into politics proves equally useless in being an outlet for his desires,

which finally erupted in the poem to create a new kind of poetry. The tragedy is that Sordello realized too late the errors of his ways. Browning's *Sordello* is one of the most important and unique nineteenth-century epics about the evolution of a poet's soul, his duty to himself, to others, and to his art. It remains relevant to this day and I feel it should be read by every poet serious about his art.

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## “Permanent Invisible” On the Poetry of René Char

The poetic universe of René Char is a magical one, a world where the invisible is eternal, where violence and destruction are intimately linked with the act of poetic creation, and where the poet must retain a proper balance between what he reveals and what he hides. In Char's poetry, permanence and invisibility are inseparable. Every object that is visible corrodes with the passage of years. There is no permanence in the visible, whose features are carved out in space and bound by time. The invisible is outside time, unbound since it is intangible, not susceptible to corrosion since it inhabits no space. It is eternal. The act of violence annihilates the visible, that which perishes in time, and preserves in its wake the essence. Throughout Char's poetry the reader is confronted by acts of violence and destruction that result in this magical transmutation. In “Permanent Invisible,” the poet hunts for permanent invisibility in the flesh through the act of making love. In the end it is the poem that captures that reality. The “Poplar Tree's Effacement” describes the obliteration of a tree during a lightning storm, and its consequent liberation from the earth as its trunk is transmuted by fire, leaving only the poplar's essence. Char writes, “If we dwell in a lightning bolt, it is the heart of the eternal.” The poet too summons the lightning

bolt of inspiration in whose fire he is consumed, disappearing in the flames of the creative act. The lightning bolt is the poet's revelation. In the end, what remains are the words of the text, like charred fragments of an intense encounter, the creator erased in the act of creation, present on the page as luminous, as essence.

Char is also concerned with the problems of artistic exposure. In "The Warbler in the Reeds," the bird (poet) is able to sing her "cavatinas" only after she has vanished from the sight of the hunter's gun and become invisible. There is a constant element of risk and danger present in Char's world and the urgent problem of the poet is to determine how much to reveal and how much to hide. In the poem "To Resume," Char writes, "We suddenly got too close to something from which we'd been kept at a mysteriously favorable and measured distance. Since then, corrosion. Our headrest has disappeared." The poet must respect a certain distance between himself and the reader. To show too much can be deadly as is the case with the warbler. So too, the poet must be precise and specific enough to convey the mystery while using ellipses to counterbalance the explicitness. In *Lightning: The Poetry of René Char*, Nancy Piore writes that Char "deploras the technological mind which turns the earth into an object to be regulated, willed, which strips away all mystery, or attempts to." True sight is in the heart; science is blind. Reason limits and destroys the true essence of beauty, which is pure, sensual, and eternal. In the words of Piore, "The heart's domain is poetry, and poetry can capture beauty without killing it." Reason leads to the death of beauty. The poet tries to capture the essence of true beauty, which is intangible and mysterious, through using ellipses and creating a "saving distance" between himself and the reader. This poetic process also involves an effacement of the self. The poet is fleeting. He must not linger too long in one place. Piore also writes that "the poet refuses to 'found anything' — systems, kingdoms, servitudes." The poetry of René Char concerns the invisible which is eternal, the transmutation of the finite into an eternal essence through destruction, and the proximity that can kill.

Char’s poem “Permanent Invisible” concerns the theme of invisibility as eternal, the way in which poetry can capture the beauty that is elusiveness itself:

Permanent invisible of coveted hunting grounds,  
Close, close, invisible and almost in my hands  
O distant quarry, those nights when I sink down  
To novice flesh against flesh.  
Drinking against the cold, being brutal restores.  
Over this double garden you form a rounded dome  
You are solid as the rose which is to be.<sup>1</sup>

In the poem, the poet is hunting that which is “absolutely and for all time beyond his reach, and which paradoxically the poem captures.” The poet, through a brutal act of love making with an impermanent and visible woman, almost reaches that which is intangible, elusive, and thus the most lasting of realities. Ultimately, it is not the woman but the poem that captures that reality. The image of the rose before it exists suggests something that is eternal. It is not bound by time or space since it does not exist. It is the infinite rose, the beautiful unity that is permanent. The poet attempts to capture what eludes him. Char writes, “The poet does not hold onto what he discovers; having transcribed it, soon loses it. This makes him new, infinite, endangered.” In “Permanent Invisible,” Char is describing the elusive beauty that is just beyond his reach, a beauty which the poem finally captures.

In the prose poem, “The Warbler in the Reeds,” the bird, in hiding from the gunshots of the hunter, becomes invisible and undergoes a transformation which unifies her with the world in the moment of song:

The tree most exposed to the shotgun’s eye is not a tree for her wing. The quicksilver one is forewarned: she will pass

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1 From *Nakedness Lost*, translated by Patricia Terry, in *Selected Poems of René Char*.

through in silence. Her fugitive claw grapples and gives up at once a perch in the willow. But from her hiding place in the clustered reeds, what *cavatinas*! It is here that she sings. As the whole world knows.

Summer, the river, spaces, lovers hidden away, a whole watermelon, the warbler repeats, “Free, free, free, free.”<sup>2</sup>

The warbler is silent until she cannot be seen — “she will pass through in silence.” She finds a hiding place in the “clustered reeds” where she sings her “*cavatinas*.” The poem suggests the “saving distance” that the poet must retain in order to avoid death. The bird vanishes into the reeds as the poet vanishes into the text of his poem. In the last sentence of the poem, a magical transformation occurs. The last line of the poem suggests that the “summer, the river, spaces, lovers hidden away, a whole watermelon,” *are* the warbler. In her invisibility she has become her surroundings. In the instant of her song, she is infinite and free, “all heaviness evaporates, all things are transformed and unified, freed of their earthbound substance to become pure light, pure song, freed of their separate and constraining identities to become transparent.” The moment of song is eternal. In her invisibility the bird (poet) is able to create her art, fueled by the constant threat of danger, showing caution in expression through ellipsis.

In Char’s universe, violence and destruction are intimately linked with the act of poetic creation. Through annihilation the poet preserves essences. The image of lightning is often used in connection with this theme of creation through destruction:

The hurricane is stripping the woods.  
I lull the tender-eyed lightning to sleep.  
Let the great wing where I tremble  
Marry the earth where I grow.

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2 From *The Word as Archipelago*, translated by Patricia Terry, in *Selected Poems of René Char*.

Its breath sharpens my vigil.  
How turbid it is, the hollow  
Of the sullied streambed's lure!

A key will be my dwelling.  
The feint of a fire the heart confirms;  
And the air whose talon holds it.<sup>3</sup>

The poplar tree is destroyed in a lightning storm, a brilliant explosion that appears in much of Char's poetry. The key to the poem is the lightning bolt carried in the talons of the air that results in a, "fiery spacious death, the kind that Char covets." Char writes, "The spacious lightning and the fire of a kiss / will charm my tomb set up by the storm." The tree is liberated from the earth, its flesh transmuted into fire, so that what remains is essence. Jean Starobinski has suggested that the key is also the poem. Indeed, it is the poet's disappearance that illuminates the words of his text. When the poet writes, he holds the lightning in his hands and vanishes in the explosion. He is liberated in the flames of revelation. What remains is the essence, that luminosity that lights up the page, the permanent invisible that is the essence of beauty itself.

In the poem, "Robust Meteors," violence and magic are also allied in the act of poetic creation:

In the wood we listen to the worm boiling  
The chrysalis turning toward a clear face  
Its natural deliverance

Men are hungry  
For secret meats for cruel implements  
Rise up beasts to slaughter

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3 From *Nakedness Lost*, translated by Nancy Piore, in *Selected Poems of René Char*.

To reach the sun.<sup>4</sup>

For René Char, the chrysalis is an emblem of things to be, of future creation. Char is describing violence as a rite of passage into another state of illumination. Violence is equated with a kind of death that leads to rebirth. Mechthild Cranston, in his essay “Violence and Magic: Aspects of René Char’s Surrealist Apprenticeship” writes, “man and animals must pass through death, must be strangled or slain with ‘cruel implements,’ must offer up their ‘secret meats’ to reach, like the chrysalis, their natural deliverance. Only after death will they be lifted, as by enchantment, to the realm of the sun, where man and the beasts will live forever, transformed into the eternal animals of the sky.” The act of creation involve annihilation in order to “reach the sun,” the final illumination that is the poem.

The “Mortal Partner” is a poem about the act of poetic creation itself. The poem describes a man and woman in the center of the white surface (the page) of the boxing ring. They begin to fight. After several blows their battered heads are swaying and nodding. From the poem,

At that instant [the man] must have purposely pronounced something into the second’s [the woman] ear so perfectly offensive, or appropriate, or enigmatic, that the latter let fly a lightning bolt, abrupt, complete, precise, which knocked the incomprehensible fighter out cold.

Char characterizes the poem as offensive, appropriate, enigmatic. Poetry provokes, it is a weapon yielded with accuracy and it is also enigmatic. It destroys its enunciator. Nancy Piore writes, “The poet’s self must be effaced, impersonalized, torn-up and re-begun, to yield that piece of the permanent invisible that is the poem.” The poet comes too close to the secret of life itself. He dares to approach the unapproachable and this is both what

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4 From *The Hammer with No Master*, translated by Mary Ann Caws, in *Selected Poems of René Char*.

destroys and illuminates him. The result of the encounter is an explosion which erases the poet and leads to his rebirth in and through the poem. Char characterizes the encounter between the poet and his act as a violent struggle. Words hit with the force of bullets and the act of creation is charged with electricity and annihilation, the poet perishing in the “desperate nuptial conflict which yields his poem,” which illuminates the blank surface of the page.

Another major theme in Char’s poetry concerns the problem of artistic exposure, the extent to which the poet must reveal or conceal certain secrets that lay at the heart of the world: proximity is deadly. In the poem, “To Resume,” Char writes that “We suddenly got too close to something from which we’d been kept at a mysteriously favorable and measured distance. Since then, corrosion.” As this distance vanishes, corrosion dominates, insidiously gnawing away at all forms. Char writes, “Our headrest has disappeared.” Our intellect has set the vicious and destructive process in motion. Char detests the technological mind and declares that, “Science can only furnish devastated man with a blind lighthouse, a weapon of distress, tools without legend.” The true visionary is the human heart. Science and reason destroy the beautiful mystery of life by attempting to regulate and categorize all it sees. Char seeks to regain a sense of the mysterious and his method is ellipses counterbalanced by clarity and precision. René Char calls for ellipses and brevity in poetry. Gone are the times of the verbose adoration and self-obsession of the Romantics. Char writes, “The adoration of the shepherds is no longer useful to the planet.” There is no longer any need for poetry that is passive. Char’s concise, structured, enigmatic poems hit with the strength of a fist, with the speed of a bullet. Piore writes, the “poem veils the poet’s nakedness and his naked vision of the world he wishes to exhibit and preserve and therefore must hide from the reader even as he shows it.” Nonetheless, the problem of artistic exposure is a complicated one and not easily resolved. Char writes, “If what I show you and what I give you seem less than what I hide, my weighing is poor, my reaping ineffectual.”

Char's approach to this problem is to seek a form of rebirth in the stripping away of "life's ugly accumulation to find again the gaze that loved it enough in the beginning to display its foundation." The poet must look with the eyes of a child whose impressions are impulsive. The poet must see with the same wonder and desire of a child in order to share his vision of life's substructure which is mysterious, magical. At the same time the poet must be strong and active. Char's brief encounter with surrealism nurtured his idea of revolt as a means of change and his participation in the Resistance awoke in him the importance of action. Char has written that, "Comfort is a crime." The poet uses ellipses to convey the sense of mystery in his poems. The poet vanishes, omits things, does not dwell on topics, offers no explanations. He simply leaves. He oscillates between visibility and invisibility, lucid and aware, but refusing to create systems. Each of his poems captures an instant and renders it eternal and yet the poet himself is never secure. For Char, the act of poetry is "virgin, even if repeated." It is this insecurity, this burning intensity, that keeps the poet from becoming passive. He must always be on his guard in a world of danger and risk while he produces his magical poems of mysterious beauty. The poet is continually creating, moving onward to new worlds of perception that are magical, infinite. He is active in the world, a magician of fantastic planets. Char writes, "The poet does not hold onto what he discovers; having transcribed it, soon loses it. This makes him new, infinite, endangered."

In Char's world, the invisible is eternal, violence and destruction liberate the visible from the chains of time, and proximity is deadly. In his universe the visible perishes. The essence is invisible, incorruptible and eternal. The image of the lightning bolt suggests the intensity of revelation and its consequent effacement of the self, leaving in its wake the permanent invisible, the luminous, which is the poem. Poetry must be impersonal and enigmatic. Char achieves a sense of the mysterious substructure of life through ellipses and brevity. Proximity can kill; poetry requires a certain distance and precision to convey the mysterious beauty which lay at the heart of the world. He must counterbal-

ance obscurity with explicitness, and in this manner avoid the corruption of this beauty by placing it within rigidly logical and confining mental systems. In an essay on Char, written in 1958, Albert Camus wrote,

Char does more than express what we are: he is also the poet of our tomorrow. Although he remains alone, he brings us together, and the admiration he arouses mingles with that great fraternal warmth within which men bear their best fruit. We can be sure of it; it is in works like his from now on that we will seek recourse and vision. Char's poems are messengers of truth, of that lost truth each day now brings us closer to, although for a long time we were able only to say that it was our country and that far away from it we suffered, as if in exile. But words finally take shape, light dawns, one day the country shall receive its name.

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## Sound As Thought

### Notes on Clark Coolidge

*When you can't stop the words, the silence is / verbal.*

#### 1. Notes on Some of Coolidge's Work from the Seventies to the Nineties

Collected in *Space* (1970), Clark Coolidge's early work explored the possibilities of words as visual and sound structures, and using the page much as a visual artist would use the canvas, Coolidge examined the ways in which words give form to the blank page. The jacket cover of *Space* is by Jasper Johns: A ruler is placed at a slight angle upon a charred wooden background. Here, Coolidge's poems function in the same way as the ruler; they measure the surrounding space of the page, give structure and substance to the otherwise formless void. A note on the book jacket says, "Coolidge's structures are reductive. Syntax—the systematic connection between words which gives linear discourse its character of extended meaning—is simply removed." The absence of any accumulation of inherited meanings leads to a consideration of the words as sound constructions, the poem as musical composition. The poems achieve this condition of music, abstract and subjective, but not with-

out meaning for the ear and mind. Meaning, instead, is a function of the syllables, sound as thought in motion. Understanding and misunderstanding alike contribute to an experience of the world. Already, in these early poems, the vector of Coolidge's development is set away from history and politics. The gain of his poetry is a significant break with the lyric tradition in American poetry, the hauntings of iambic pentameter. The words, divested of their familiar positions in the grammatical order which generates conventional meaning, are launched into the open spaces of the page, where they draw attention to themselves as musical figures.

In *The Maintains* (1974), *Polaroid* (1975), and *Quartz Hearts* (1978), Coolidge shows an increasing concern for the syntactic possibilities in language. *The Maintains*, written with the use of a dictionary, expanded what Coolidge thought of as the limited vocabulary of the poet. The book also raises questions about the nature of the creative self and the possibility of external input in the creation of a poem. A vocabulary thought of as personal to the poet, to his/her individual style, was thought of as limiting to Coolidge. He writes, "There is no single vocabulary, poet's vocabulary ... the self as multitudinous, hence a vocabulary in flux." For Coolidge, there was only a self in transit, fluid, dynamic, in a continual passage through the wild of language, a vocabulary changeable and determined to a certain extent from the outside. Coolidge writes, about the creation of a poem, "I began to see how it was really excitingly done: You wrote from what you didn't know toward whatever could be picked up in the act. Poetry starts here." Coolidge conceived of *The Maintains* as a "dictionary work," created by looking into the dictionary and using those pages as a direct source for the poems. The realization that there was a kind of syntax at work in the dictionary, "phrases like 'that which is blank,' that sort of syntax," helped give shape to *The Maintains*. The dictionary maintains the language, all the proper meanings of words are organized there. In this book Coolidge plays with the foundation of our inherited meanings and disrupts that to generate a different way

of seeing the world with language: “In back of everything is a barrier. We need to flood it all, really ram those photons.”

About *Polaroid*, Coolidge writes that it “was almost the reverse of that impulse. I mean, a backlash against so many nouns, so many descriptive words. I picked a set of words — prepositions, connectives of various kinds, which’s and that’s and conjunctions — and thought I would limit myself to those,” but eventually nouns and adjectives started to appear and determine the course of this work; the longer lines start about midway through the book. This gives *Polaroid* an “outer dimension,” which gets it away from “language as language.” *Quartz Hearts* overlaps with this section of *Polaroid* and the beginning of a longer “prosoid” work. Coolidge, writing about *Quartz Hearts*, says, “It is in very sense a hinge work, reflecting a fresh interest in sentence as axial structure, the final movement of *Polaroid* had pushed me toward, the prosoid’s lengths would explore in full.” Furthermore, *Quartz Hearts* constitutes a, “meditation on the state(s) of things, in other words words.” There is also list of books, music, and other personal items that were used in the making of the poem; these included Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, Gerry Mulligan’s earliest quartets from the early fifties, Kerouac’s *Desolation Angels*, Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, *Texts for Nothing*, and *Watt*, Thelonious Monk’s “I Should Care,” his solo on Columbia Records, and Beethoven’s late quartets. Notable here is the influence of jazz which has played a significant role in the way in which Coolidge determined the music of his line. He is a drummer, and in his youth played in a West Coast group called Serpent Power with David Meltzer. Jazz phrasing and improvisation are central to Coolidge’s poetics. Coolidge also notes the early Gerry Mulligan quartets which achieved an advance in counterpoint without the aid of a piano. They dispensed with the engine room. In *Quartz Hearts*, Coolidge writes, “I don’t sense I state.” The poem is not pre-determined, or based on a sensual apprehension of reality, but as if “received” from outside. The poet is the medium for the message. In this work, he continues the development of syntactical structures which resist linear exposition. No sense but in the sound.

The eighties and nineties yielded numerous and various works that display a more autobiographical strain in Coolidge's work. For example, *Own Face*, published in 1978. This book was concerned with real-life events, with friends, and with observations of the past. The abstract quality of the early works gives rise here to meditations on the self and memory. But for Coolidge, "Your name is the precise settle of lights on anything spinning." It is this work that determined the new arc in Coolidge's writing. The *Book of During* (1989) and *Mesh* (1988) both examined the nature of the erotic and its relation to death and fantasy. *Odes of Roba* (1991) and *At Egypt* (1988) are books written as a result of various travels, in Italy and Egypt, respectively. *The Crystal Text* is a meditation on a colorless quartz crystal and the examination of the self in relation to the object, of the ways in which it may be possible to reorient cognition such that the outside world of the object would be allowed to articulate. Two major collections also appeared, *Solution Passage, 1978-1981* and *Sound As Thought, 1982-1984*, as well as an artist's book entitled *On the Slates* (1992), the text of which is contained on a small scroll placed inside an actual shoe within a shoebox. *The Rova Improvisations* (1994) are a series of meditations on the music of the San Francisco based saxophone quartet, ROVA. Coolidge writes about his procedure:

These writings were begun in the process of preparing to compose the liner notes for ROVA's album, *The Crowd*. They exist as two parallel surges of improvisation. The first written while listening to all the tracks of ROVA's albums in the order of their recording. The second while reading through those initial writings. One written in the hollows of the music. The other in the silence of the words.

This book remains one of my favorite books of Coolidge. It is fascinating, knowing ROVA's work, to see Coolidge create a sonic equivalent to their complex layers of saxophone sounds. As I mentioned already, jazz phrasing informs Coolidge's line.

Kerouac's bop prose was also a major influence. I'm thinking of this quote from Coolidge's book on jazz, *Now It's Jazz*: "Also, and at any rate, sound is movement. It interests me that the words 'momentary' and 'moments' come from the same Latin: 'moveo,' to move. Every statement exists in time and vanishes in time, like in alto saxophonist Eric Dolphy's famous statement about the music: 'When you hear music, after it's over it's gone in the air, you can never capture it again.'" Of course, with a recording you can play it back on a turntable or CD. For this reason Coolidge's book is an interesting one: The first part represents the initial hearing which produces a text on the fly, "what was picked up in the act"; the second section is a writing through those initial writings, a second kind of improvisation which includes thought. Here is free improvisation and composition, not one or the other, but both, "To set in motion, contains its own stopping point." In the collaborative work with Guston, *Baffling Means*, Coolidge delineates a poetics based partly on the modernist aesthetic: the problem of knowledge, self and the other, the sense of a lost Absolute ("Art looms backward / to the first mark (pre-history.) And not through enforced forgetting, but an excess for memory"), the elements of desire, poem as necessity. He writes, "Art is isolate ... / At its deepest levels art is an attribute of / nothing else."

## 2. Instead of a Conclusion: A Brief Sketch of Coolidge as Gnostic poet

Coolidge's work creates energies in opposition to the inherited syntax and semantics of language. It is a work of boundless energy in flux that resists fixity in thought or sound. Rigid thought patterns are overthrown at the start. Mind moves freely over syllables generating heat in an endless wave. Coolidge writes, "I don't link any thing enough to stop it." Not the point but the drift is what matters. Thought is sound, the poem an incomplete thought, the "sorts of motion," incomplete for the sake of another thought, an accumulation of thoughts, that by their very incompleteness refuse containment. And by thought,





Perhaps it's just that the words have all been said  
but not by me, and the process is a trial.

But all the while I eye you, demon,  
your bird hoards are clustering here. Sent for calm and  
brought crazy still.

The price is possible madness, but the poet must go on in his search for, "the mystery of everything that has always been written." Coolidge's venture into the unknown, the boiling luminous, to create "the unstoppable endless volleying Everything Work," gives his work a spiritual or gnostic dimension that rewards repeated readings and makes Coolidge one of our most important poets.

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## Essays on Some of the Prose Poems in Barbara Guest's *The Confetti Trees*

In many ways Barbara Guest has a late-Romantic sensibility though she began as a poet firmly rooted in the experimental poetry world of the first generation of New York School poets. In the fifties she was associated with Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and James Schuyler, as well as many of the Abstract Expressionist painters of the time, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. She has also written extensively on the work of these painters. Her poetry is visual and one of her concerns in this book is with the problem of art and reality, the ideal and the real. In *The Confetti Trees* (1999), she examines these issues in terms of the visual medium of film.

### “The Tear”

Guest's “The Tear” expresses a kind of poetics of implication and suggestion rather than direct address. In this way, the Director in the film is able to convey a subjective state without the interference of objective fact. In this prose poem, the fatigue of the actress is “conveyed by the way she bends down to loosen her hiking boots.” This feeling is exhibited through a physical motion, the subjective by a concrete action. Moreover, the “heat is given a further tonality when a cloud of bees swarms over the

horizon.” The subjective experience of the heat, which we are told “arises from the distant sand,” is influenced by a change in the surrounding space, that is, the introduction of the fact of a “cloud of bees.” But the camera, we are told, focuses primarily on the actress’s eye, and “this *close up* of her eye with its tear is purposefully designed to interfere with the camera’s exploration of landscape.” The tear “signifies ... a possible sadness entering the film,” just as the motion of the actress signifies “fatigue.” Conveying emotion is by suggestion rather than explication. The objective landscape recedes into the background as the camera focuses on the “tear.” In fact, “The Director desires to wrest our attention from the landscape! The camera ‘says’ it is no longer interested in the details of nature.” Rather than a specific concrete detail or fact, the director is more interested in the subjective, romantic scenario. The camera must now focus solely on this mysterious “long-haired woman,” which has become, indeed, a kind of Romantic figure.

Then the camera changes its focus and rather than “*its engaged closing in* on her eye, we are permitted to follow the hesitation of her arm.” It is as if the scene is being revealed through implication and suggestion, a balance between what is seen and what remains unseen, where a “tear” and the “hesitation” of an arm reveal more about a subjective state than language ever could. This is an idea that will be further developed in the following essays on *The Confetti Trees*. For now, it suffices to say, that against the fact of nature and the landscape, the director’s Romantic sensibility is more concerned with implication and subtle changes in tone. Finally, Guest writes, “Only then, (an almost invisible moment of time) we recognize that the camera is ‘*intimating, not telling*’ that the *dramatic* action of this film is about to begin.” For Guest, it is through implication, ellipses, suggestion, and changes in tonality, that the poem can convey the subjective truth of experience, more *realistically* than any attempt at conventional realism.

## “The Cough”

“The Cough” is similar to “The Tear” in that both concern an uncontrollable physical or emotional reaction, pregnant with meaning through suggestion. In this poem, the director, Wilhelm is suffering from an uncontrollable cough. Guest writes about him, “perhaps his throat was struggling with words.” The conflict between words and images is a theme that will be explored throughout *The Confetti Trees*. On one level, this poem is about the problem of language in expressing ideas, and the two directors, Wilhelm and Nagao, seem to misread and almost mishear each other in the attempt to find a solution to the problems they pose. Language is a game where these two directors seem to exist in their own subjective worlds. Nagao, the Japanese director, says about Wilhelm’s cough, amusingly, that it exhibits an “Allergy to our film.” The directors are riding in a car as they talk about the film they are making. At a bend in the road, “where in Japanese films a short dark woman usually squats, Wilhelm pointed out a break between two buildings where light crept through like an oyster. He would like to use that oyster light.” To the Japanese director this seems like a “Cliché.” Perhaps he is thinking of oyster lights as artificial. Nevertheless, the poetic image is not what the Japanese director seems interested in. But once again, there appears to be a problem with their communication. Can we be totally sure that they understand each other? Nevertheless, Wilhelm improvises the title *Dark Blue Denim*, for their film, while gazing at the Japanese director’s blue denim jeans. Wilhelm alternates from a poetic image to a more mundane image. Moreover, he “wished the noise an oyster makes could get into the film.” Curiously, John Philpots, in his book, *Oysters, and All About Them* (1891) writes about a curious incident involving the sounds an oyster makes:

The landlord listened, hardly believing his ears. There was, however, no doubt about the matter. One of the oysters was distinctly whistling or, at any rate, producing a sort of “sifflement” with its shell. It was not difficult to detect the phenom-

enal bivalve, and in a very few minutes he was triumphantly picked out from among his fellows, and put by himself in a spacious tub, with a plentiful supply of brine and meal. The news spread through the town, and for some days the house was besieged by curious crowds. That the oyster did whistle, or do something very much like whistling, is beyond all question. How he managed to do so is not upon record.

I use this interesting detail from a writer of the Victorian period to suggest that Wilhelm is obeying the directive of the imagination here, a subjective and romantic vision of what his film could be. This detail also suggests the romantic sensibility of the nineteenth-century Romantics. Nevertheless, the Japanese director comes up with an image even more mysterious. He says, "Better noise the eye when it blinks. '*Pachi Pachi* in Japanese." It is said that there are numerous sounds the eyelid can make when the eyes blinks, from a "squeaking" to a "cracking" sound. Oysters don't normally make sounds and they have no ears. Wilhelm challenges the Japanese director by suggesting a "sound of creaking wood" for the "scene of the two people lost in the garden." But the Japanese director insists that "*Pachi Pachi*" is better because it is "more subtle."

The Japanese director is interested in more "arty" images; "the noise an oyster makes" and "the noise eyelids make" are conceptual poems themselves or conceptual images. Wilhelm is more radical in his subjectivity, more the romantic, perhaps. Moreover, Wilhelm wants a "violent crescendo" where a body falls down the stairs and where "perhaps another body could fall on top of it." The more we learn about Wilhelm the more we see a Romantic sensibility at work, improvising subjective states, and attempting to give a shape to the invisible through suggestion while he is nevertheless bound by ideas of the real. The Japanese director is more practical: "Could be liquid soap on stair." The Japanese director's comment about technicalities and how the scene could be facilitated undercuts Wilhelm's scene of romantic violence, almost sexualized, which is not an

accident produced by soap on the stairs. Finally, we learn about the emotional and psychological state of mind that Wilhelm is struggling with here:

In the middle of a film, Wilhelm had the feeling he was being chased. He complained that when he directed those shots up in the sky with two planes flying parallel to each other, he was also in a sky chase.

A dream of being chased is a common one. It suggests the avoidance of something, or perhaps a fear of something from his past. Essentially, this suggests anxiety. In the following passage, the reader learns more about the possible source for Wilhelm's feelings of unease:

Perhaps he might return home for awhile and the scenarist could work with Nagao. She could put her own story into the script, how she got hired, etc. Was there something going on between her and Nagao.

The German director, Wilhelm, exhibits a characteristic Germanic interest in the Romantic and a sexualized violence that lies underneath, which is also barbaric. Wilhelm is clearly jealous of the Japanese director; this may have been the cause of the tension in their conversation. On the other hand, the Japanese director maintained his composure. He is not a Romantic but as practical as he is subtle.

Guest writes that Wilhelm "thought of home as a possible sequence" for his film. He thought *Home* needed editing, "especially the scene with his analyst when they discussed his cough that now seemed like another room in the movie." He inserts not only the life of the scenarist but his own personal life into the film. In this way the film becomes a personal, subjective, vision. Nagao believes that the film is "too slow," and "old fashioned." His main complaint is about what he thinks is Wilhelm's need to "explain why gangsters upset the fish cart." But for Wilhelm, the fish cart, is like "a capsule of real life," like "a scene

by the painter, Utamaro,” the eighteenth-century Japanese artist. Wilhelm finally offers a title for the film that expresses his conflicted feelings, which are similar, in one way or another, to many of the directors in the *Confetti Trees: Dreams of Real Life*. The dilemma of the ideal and the real is balanced by imagining a dream of the real. Of course, Nagao, with “both eyes blinking,” a witty detail inserted by Guest, says, “No ... *The Cough* is better.” By comparison with Wilhelm, the Japanese director is a realist, unconflicted emotionally, and by suggesting *The Cough* as the title, both concedes to Wilhelm, in the sense that it is *his* cough that will stand for the title of the film, and contradicts him, with an image that is both suggestive and physical. One can also say that the European mind, represented by Wilhelm, which is fundamentally based on duality, is different from the thought of the East, represented by Nagao, where no such philosophical problem subsists. And, finally, the poem also suggests the fierce and barbaric, Romantic sensibility of the Germanic mind as against the contemplative Buddhist sensibility with its idea of the *Tau*.

### “Falling in Love” and “Details”

The two prose poems, “Falling in Love” and “Details” are linked because they contain the same mysterious and unnamed director, who, in the former, directed an actress’s movements that suggest a kind of erotic pose based on his own repressed desires, and in the latter, expresses the fact that he “lived in the real world too much” and thus “hated reality,” which leads him to attempt, in his film, to synthesize the ideal world of the dream and reality. We are introduced to the director in “Falling in Love” as he is telling his actress, “you have to be on your toes.” Then a curious and rather funny thing happened, the “actress obediently tiptoed out of the room.” Apparently, she takes the directive literally. We, as readers, are surprised and amused at Guest’s turn of phrase. But actually this shows the working of a main theme in her book: the ideal world of art and its encounter with reality; the confusion this may cause is, in this case, a matter of language, as in the poem, “Romance,” discussed later, where words

evoke a dream-like and magical world. Here, a colloquial phrase is taken literally. The "creative" phrase is interpreted in a literal sense. This crossing of the one sense with another, as in the case of the dream with reality, produces a humorous effect. Like the Freudian slip, one phrase suggests another, and the result suggests repressed desires. Guest is suggesting that the difference between a magical world and a real world is contained in the language we use; a poem is not a legal handbook. And so, like the Freudian slip, what is said often suggests repressed feelings of a sexual kind. Guest's writes about the director that he

liked small body movements, toes turned outward and knees hidden under clothing. He had seen her knees knocking against the fabric of her body. Knocking knees disturbed him, although his own walk was odd, with one foot hitting the other.

Thus, like the director in the poem, "Enchantment," film is a subjective record of an inner need. In this case, the feeling suggests a kind of sexual frustration, or more generally, any repressed desire. Furthermore, this repressed desire is born of his own insecurity with the odd way he walks. But the actress emerges again in the frame, "obediently on tip toes, her head in a cloud the effects man had built, but her body was off balance. Standing on one foot as she was told to do, her torso was off center." There is the surprising detail which operates like the initial "misreading" of the colloquial phrase earlier in the poem, this being "her head in a cloud the effects man had built." "Her head in a cloud" is a phrase similar to "being on your toes." In the latter case, the actress takes a colloquial phrase literally. Here the phrase, "to have your head in the clouds," which means to have a dreamy temperament that suggests an aversion to reality, expresses something literal, when the reader is told this "cloud" has been created by an effects man. So, the "dream" is a creation, born of props and the creativity of the effects man, thus born from real things in the world. In fact, film is a *simulation* of reality. Of course, since the actress is in a very precarious

position, her body off balance, she falls down, “with that little look of surprise one always has,” but, unfortunately, her fall is not captured by the camera, and she fell outside the camera’s range. Guest continues, “This deeply annoyed the Director who wanted to stress the frailty of the body with this fall.” We are told that her “pose,” which created great stress on the muscles of her body, causing her to fall, was the director’s attempt to show how frail the body is. The actress, in her contorted pose and her eventual fall, comes to represent the dream’s tenuous relation to reality. The dream is not only manufactured from objects in the real world and thus bound to reality, but its representation on film is subject to the same strict demands of filmmaking—the very real concerns of schedules, finances, fees for the actors, actresses, etc. Often the director is forced to compromise. But the problem between the Ideal and the Real is an *essential* one. Guest concludes the poem with “The whole company would be surprised when later the front office titled their film, ‘She Falls in Love.’” There is this wonderful final twist to the poem that adds another level to Guest’s exploration of the relation between dream and reality. The title “She Falls in Love” is in one sense, so prosaic and Hollywood-like, but in another, it shows that love itself is like a dream, which forces reality to conform to its insane demands, often with tragic results.

In the following prose poem, “Details,” we learn more about the director of “Falling in Love.” We learn he has the “same attitude toward his actors, sitting in his poncho under an umbrella reading the script as the storm approached.” It is an image of loneliness. And immediately he makes a mistake in perception. Apparently, the actors are standing near a barrel. The director had asked them to stand there. Taking out his binoculars he notices something different, that there are also barns in the frame. He had asked the actors to gather barrels while the cameraman fixed his shot. But, in fact, he then notices that the barns were a house. It is a perceptual mistake, one, Guest tells us, that was common for the director. We also learn that the director was noted for his use of the landscape and that “the house changed

the whole concept." Furthermore, the barrels were added to lend a sense of "impermanence to the scene," something he wanted in the picture. Guest notes that "impermanence" was not the word the director used. Instead he used the phrase, "a bit shaky, apt to roll away if not watched." There is the landscape, the house, and the barrels. In the director's mind the landscape comes to represent a kind of eternal or imaginary space, against which the house, suggesting human interference, is intrusive. The barrels, apparently "rolling" along suggest movement, and thus "impermanence"; they could also be thought of as a bit-shaky; they are there, as we learn, to be moved from the house, down "rickety stairs." When the action begins, there is the addition of "mechanical studio rain." The actors reappear in the scene, exiting or entering the house, "with lit or unlit cigarettes."

The final "detail" concerns the cigarettes the actors are smoking. The director asks them to put them out but to keep the unlit cigarettes in their mouths, as they continue to push the barrels in and out of the house. It is an interesting detail, perhaps phallic, or, perhaps, there to maintain any common associations with cigarette smoking, from elegant sophistication to manly virility. Presumably this scene takes place in the forties, where the public perception of smoking was not as it is now. The director, after witnessing this scene, returns to his car, not content with the image. First, there was the problem with the "mechanical," rain, but it looked too mechanical — the attempt to represent reality has failed. The director feels he has "missed something," and is critical about the scene. He notes that the script had mentioned something about an "apparition." Guest suggests here that the conflict is between an ideal image and the representation of that image in reality on film. Guest writes,

Wasn't the landscape supposed to be like an apparition while the men in their raincoats going in and out of the house in the studio rain were supposed to represent reality as opposed to ... he had missed something. He lived in the real world too much these days. He hated reality. His raincoat had already dampened the seat of his expensive car and there we puddles

on the floor. ... You had no control over reality. He sat back in his seat, prepared to reconsider the film in terms of an apparition with absolutely no intrusion of the physical world and its weather.

The “real” storm had arrived to drench the director and the set. The real rain has a more devastating effect than the fake “mechanical rain.” In Guest’s memory, there were many hurricanes that had devastated Florida when she lived there during her youth. For her, a storm or hurricane, suggests death. For the director of “Falling in Love” and “Details,” the simulation of reality proves impossible. The simulated effects of rain prove too mechanical. The attempt to finish the scene also appears futile, since there is something essential missing. For a director with this romantic sensibility, the attempt to represent the real becomes so problematic that he desires to dispense with reality, and reject any reference to the physical world in his film. But this is a perilous wager he sets up between the real and the unreal. Reality intrudes upon the dream and the reverse also happens. They coexist and form the tension in any image; they cannot be separated or resolved to perfection. This tension between the real and the ideal can also create an ambiguity in the image, or something mysterious, something one cannot explain using reason. In “Details” the director’s attempt to create a “perfect” film without any reference to the physical world will result in a sterile film, divorced, as it would be, from the life blood of reality. There is also the suggestion in these two prose poems of repressed desires, that may be sexual in nature. The desire to create this kind of film is also an attempt at the sublimation of a need or desire. But this also signals death since such a film lacks a physical presence and so the desire remains repressed.

### “Romance”

In the humorous prose poem, “Romance,” Guest shows the disposition of a romantic temperament in the conflict between art and reality. In this poem the artifice of romantic language is con-

trasted sharply with the more prosaic and earthy language. The actors and actresses seek an environment of enchantment and wonder and are dissatisfied with the very common surroundings they find themselves in: "The director had led his cast to a viaduct of a dry river and the cast resented this overture to reality. They wanted to be seated in green with blossoms." The cast rebels against reality and attempts to create a scene of enchantment. The leading actor throws his motorbike "on the slope of the dry hill. He wished the bike were a grey palfrey resting on the green." A palfrey was usually one of the most expensive type of horses during the Middle Ages, sometimes equal in price to the knight's war horse which was used in battle. As a result, it was popular with nobles, ladies, and highly ranked knights and was used for riding and hunting. The word "palfrey" is evocative of the romantic Middle Ages and is a soft and mellifluous sounding word. By contrast, "motorbike" is a harsher sounding word. The first "motorbike" was created in 1894, and thus the word evokes the great industrialization of the nineteenth century, which led to a growing labor force, and a focus on materialism. Many of the late-Romantic poets reacted against this. Language and music are key in creating an atmosphere of the marvelous. Guest continues, "Having to play the tough guy was annoying. It betrayed his true character which was romantic, like the grey palfrey." Against the brash new worker produced by the new world of capital and labor, the actor seeks to evoke an older time, a time where men were romantic and chivalrous, where honor and bravery were held in high esteem.

The actresses also rebel against the director's imposition of reality. They are annoyed because they are given silly names like "Dessie" and "Brunnie" and are forced to wear "harsh leather and gun belts." Like the actors, they too are romantics. They believe their true names are "Desdimona" and "Brunhilde," even "Lotus Blossom." "Desdimona" evokes the Venetian beauty in Shakespeare's *Othello* and "Brunhilde" evokes the female warrior who was one of the Valkyries in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. The lotus in Buddhism is a symbol of the purity of the body, speech, and mind. The director makes them sip "tacky sodas" believing

that the sodas would “‘underline,’ that was his ridiculous word, ‘the level of society they belonged to. Stupid.” According to the cast this is a stupid idea. And furthermore, “underline” is a ridiculous word, suggesting the highlighting of a fact for emphasis. The cast would prefer evocative and magical language instead. Thus “underline” is a silly and prosaic word in the minds of these actors and actresses.

But the director also comes under the influence of his cast, the spell that they weave around him. He puts “a pinch of snuff in each nostril” and begins to remember a certain evocative and romantic language: “Norma Shearer ... Conquistadores ... silver armor ... Norma Shearer ... daughter of Emperor ... expensive hotel ... Barrymore ... beautiful voice ... thick oak door ... Norma.” Norma Shearer was the young Austrian princess in *Marie Antoinette* (1938). “Barrymore” is the famous actor “John Barrymore” whose beautiful and trained voice captivated audiences when the first talkies were introduced. “Conquistadores” evokes the Spanish conquerors of the sixteenth century. “Norma” evokes the female lead in Bellini’s opera, a world of druids and priestesses, of mysteries and of love. These words and phrases have the evocative power of romantic poetry.

They run through the director’s head, “like the sips of rum he remembered from the old days in the screening room, the feel of the glass in his now shaky hand.” The director remembers a time in his life when dreams and enchantment were what the films were all about. He remembers, perhaps, the excitement and desire, the willingness to be seduced by the glamorous women and handsome men in films. But now he is reduced to making realistic films about, in this case, presumably, fifties youth culture. He ponders. “*Tacky soda ... laced with gin ... ugly Burbank.*” The director, now under the spell of the old movies and of romantic language and memory, in a magical moment in the poem, himself, enters a kind of fantasy film of his own making and “floats away to his new home in New York State: ‘Duchess County roses climbing roof.’” And so Guest wonderfully concludes this humorous poem about the conflict between enchantment and reality in films.

### “NO WORDS”

In the poem, “Romance,” words assumed an importance to the extent that they evoked magical worlds or Medieval romances or actors and actresses from the golden age of Hollywood. In the poem that follows this one, “No Words,” the ability of language to accurately represent reality is questioned. We are immediately told that the director, “sat slouched and disheveled in his chair,” holding the screenplay in his hands. It is an image of weariness and perhaps despair. Words invade not only his mind but are projected onto the physical space around him, “They bounced from off the window onto the floor. They plastered the ceiling. They had fallen into his coffee cup. How he detested these words.” Immediately, a complex and unusual situation is created in the poem, resulting from a conflict between language and reality. According to the director, words do not explain the motives of actors, nor do they explain, in the scenario, why an actor leaves his house to go to the river, and then sits in his car next to the river, nor do words finally explain why the actor drove his car into the river. In frustration, the director throws the script across the room. As readers, we can more or less accept these arguments. Words cannot explain everything and are relatively useless in expressing heightened emotional states. Finally they cannot explain the suicide in the screenplay.

Significantly, the director addresses his cat, saying, “You cannot write words. That is why I love you.” But is a purr a word? No. It is a sound that expresses something very real about the animal’s “feelings,” yet it is not a “language” in the sense that the director means. Becoming increasingly agitated, he begins to shout: “FILMS ARE THE ENEMY OF WORDS,” and “WORDS ARE THE ENEMY OF FILMS.” He describes a scene where an actor has to go upstairs and murder a woman, “because these damn words say so.” Furthermore, he says, “I will not tell the actor to go up these stairs because these damned words are lying. MOTIVES personal motives refuse to let the actor go up these stairs, even if it is written that he should go up!” He reads something in the script, which is not revealed to the reader, that he refuses to believe is

true. He refers to a motive which rejects what the words claim. Indeed, a subjective reading of the script reveals the insufficiency of words. The fact that the actor “should go up” is countered by a personal motive that the director reads into the script.

In fact, the director believes that it is not “words” that “tell that actor to go up these stairs” but “Character and Time and Space.” Words in a screenplay delineate the course of the story, they are descriptive and contain direction for the actors as well as the words they speak. But they are not sufficient to explain subjective states. The forming of character is a subjective experience which deviates from the fact of the words on the page. Time and space are also independent from the written text and cannot be embodied in the words. Words have a one-dimensional orientation on the page, space is three dimensional, and time or duration is relative in comparison to words. The director is at his wit’s end. He finally refuses to direct any more films, “if they keep on handing me these Words.” It is as if he is speaking in a “foreign tongue” and the actors cannot understand what he is saying. The actor is holding a glass of water which the Director takes from him, with a smile on his face, saying, “in the familiar way of the theatre,”

‘Now walk over to the piano that is there in the dark and start to sing. But don’t ... sing any words! No WORDS. You understand. Turn your back to me and make beautiful noises. PURE NOISES! NO WORDS!’

The actor, being a musician, is able to satisfy the director’s demands. The director, breathing deeply, responds, “Ah, No Words. Passion. Only Passion.” Passion is a subjective state that words cannot describe with accuracy. The director desires language to approach the condition of music. Music is purely emotional, or even cerebral, but is it never dependent on words, never bound by a referent; music only refers to itself. In this way, the director is able to manifest an ideal of “pure noise” against the lie that is semantic language. Words are seen as a kind of impassable wall that represses the manifestation of pure desire.

In "Enchantment," the director falls back on his own subjective experience and a critical language. He too was seduced by films, but he could not satisfy his desire. In "No Words," the director dispenses with the written word and finds that he can express his passion if words approached the condition of music. In this he can experience the ideal in sound without the limitation of words.

### "Enchantment"

In the prose poem, "Enchantment," Guest traces the subtle development of a fascination for films and filmmaking and its consequences on a certain temperament. The man in question emerges "from the grit-grey skies of Los Angeles" to go to the motion picture theater to view films. For him, this is not escapism, nor he is seeking entertainment; rather, he is under a kind of spell, fascinated by films as art and thus the images he sees cause him to reflect on the ideal. He is not totally aware of the trajectory of his fascination, the true source of it. That it arises to counter the "grey skies of Los Angeles." It arises from a poverty of vivid images in his own reality. Thus his reaction to what he is seeing on the screen is all out of proportion to any sense of reality; it is really about desire and seduction:

If what he saw was totally innocuous, he crept out of the theater with bits of remembered location and dialogue in his pocket, so to speak, and hastened home to salvage them. Frequently he became choked by the splendor of the celluloid images.

He is excitable, passionate. The harmless and mundane images become imbued with a kind of luster, unreal.

But the real motive, unbeknownst to him at this point, is to "gather material for the daily dialogues with himself about the construction of a motion picture and its metaphysical position in a physical world." To this end, he rips apart the film in his mind, and rearranges the parts, until the film lay in its bare es-

amentals before him. He believes he has found a pattern to the film, the "ideal" thread by which he could reconstruct the film according to the rules of the "ideal." His real motive is to find a metaphysics that would harmonize with the physical in his life. He is seeking to fulfill a need deep within himself. It is not a rational motive but one governed by an idealistic vision of film. And since this is his motive, he is drawn into a kind of disordered relation to the real.

His fascination drives him to want to be an "acknowledged expert on the making of film." But by this he does not mean the study of the mechanics of making a film; rather, the field that interests him is more philosophical, made of "incantation and illusory objectivication." His fascination leads him to a philosophy of film not actual filmmaking. His knowledge of philosophy is considerable, but he is willing to exchange this for the "study of film as an Art," and "The theater repays him for his excessive interest by introducing him to its secret visual life." The "secret," in part, concerns the mysteries of how to create an ideal image of beauty with the magic of lighting. Naturally, this now "occupies him completely." His fascination is leading him to a final realization of his motives.

He quickly realizes that, "this world of imagined scenes needs help in its masquerade of the real." The imaginary image needs to be imbued with a sense of reality. To him, an image is simply made up of subtle variations of light and shade projected on a screen. In this sense it is fundamentally abstract or unreal, metaphysical, and thus has to acquire a sense of reality. This thought says more about himself and his fascination, the spell he is under to find a metaphysics that would accord with the physical reality, than anything about filmmaking. It satisfies a deep yearning in himself. He desires reality to be more than itself, to reflect something even greater than himself, to make of the poverty of his daily visual life an enchanted world. He wants to be seduced. This is the result of his passion, his desire to idealize the mundane object. Thus, as a "director" he

introduces into his study of this art a portion of his philosophy of the 'real' diluted with the film's portion of enchantment. It is at this point that everything becomes mixed up. As a consequence of his involvement with film he gradually is less realistic in his expectations of its scenes.

The enchantment of films works on him until reality cannot keep up; his world becomes less and less real; his expectations are all out of proportion with reality. Finally "Real life' dissolves into a motion picture frame." Realism is diluted unto it simply disappears from the picture frame, on which is projected the unreality and enchantment of the motion pictures, which have become entirely real to him. He can no longer distinguish between art and reality. Guest concludes,

The only thing to do is to write his way out of this dilemma. He appoints himself a film critic. In the darkness of the theater he scribbles. When after a few months he reviews the rapidly developing notes, he finds he has written only about himself.

He finally realizes that his fascination for films was the attempt to satisfy a desire, to be seduced by the images on the screen. This spell was born from the poverty of his visual life, the grey skies of Los Angeles. It was born of a melancholic disposition. Finally, unable to make films himself, he realizes his true calling as a film critic. But in the end, he realizes that he can only write about himself. He is marked because of his temperament, which I would call "late Romantic." He is not artistic in any conventional sense. He is unable to make films, but his failure leads to him becoming a writer. Nevertheless, he cannot escape himself in language. His entry into the film world was born of a desire to transcend himself, to prove something about himself, whether it was being an "expert" in film, or philosophy, or metaphysics, or even by learning what goes on behind the scenes in the art of making films. But he finds only that he is writing about himself.

He returns to himself, his desires remain unsatisfied because unreal. So what else could he have become but a writer!

### “The Spell of Beauty”

Film, by its very nature, makes apparent the problems of representation and reality. The projection of light upon a screen produces an image as ephemeral as reality, but it is only a simulation of reality and in many ways an idealization of the real. The duration of a film is also illusory, however much the sensation of linear time passing is suggested. The problem of the ideal and the real is embedded deeply in the image projected on the screen.

How that image is lighted is an essential aspect of filmmaking. Film in its essence is simply a collection of images composed of subtle gradations of light and shadow. The way this light is projected, for example, onto a woman's face (one thinks of the Hollywood stars of the forties) becomes the pressing issue in creating an image of exceptional, and thus unreal, beauty. For example, Garbo's beauty was largely constructed by the cinematographer's manipulation of light and shadow. Beauty is an illusion, prepackaged in the Hollywood films of this time, for our consumption. The “star system” was just such an arbitrary collection of beautiful women during the golden age of Hollywood.

Guest's prose poem, “The Spell of Beauty” is an examination of how a concept of beauty was manufactured in the Hollywood studios of the forties. However, much directors sought out beautiful women to film, “Hollywood had never determined its own canon of beauty.” Guest points to the elusive quality of Beauty, using an image worthy of a late-Romantic poet:

For this canon to remain indestructible one had to be fanatically aware that the skin that presents itself as beauty is part of the fairy tale that envelops the studio while it continues to sleep in its palace of cobwebs.

Of course, the reference is to the fairy tale of "Sleeping Beauty." But there is no prince. Beauty is asleep, and, in terms of the beautiful image in film, she will never awaken, never reveal her secret. Here also is a feminist reading of the fairy tale. Guest continues, "The giants of industry were always under a spell" and for this reason, "a certain type was displayed in their films, not beautiful at all." In fact, ideal beauty is a mirage. One of the producers, "stripped as he had been of money and wives" continues a futile search for the beauty in the "fairy tale." Guest describes this producer, continuing her feminist reading, as one of the most "voluble" of the "unhappy men powerful determined magnetic men" who "discuss a subject that eludes them and will continue to do so." This producer "had lost so many worldly goods" in the search for beauty. The ideal possesses the mind to the neglect of things in the world. He is under a spell.

Furthermore, "The fault lay actually in the camera. A truly lovely woman is an enigma to its lenses, she is beyond the propriety of real life." The ideal cannot be represented on film. Film must always strike an unprofitable bargain with the ideal. But this problem is one that every visual artist knows: "beauty lies in distortion as Ingres, a favorite of this studio official . . . , discovered." Beauty is subjective, which is one reason why the Ideal cannot be successfully captured by the camera. It is so rare as to be impossible to find. The realization that an ideal of beauty is a fiction, and that rare beauty is the result of a visual distortion, is not what the studio officials want to hear. This causes the men to be "restless and domineering at the same time," because they are aware that the rarest jewel commands the highest price, and despair of ever finding it. Guest tells us that there was only one director who, "marked by the 'wound of artistry'" was willing to "cope with ideal beauty." The artist is like André Gide. Gide, having been a symbolist in his youth, encountered the harsh nature of the real, and it changed the tone and themes of his later work. The "wound" Guest is speaking of is unique to the artist who suffers from the failure of his idealization of the world, as it crashes into the wall of the real. This director's work was never finished according to schedule. Indeed, the film by a director

working with “ideal beauty” is never finished, is always provisional. The elusive and ephemeral nature of the ideal can only be captured in a fragmentary, partial sense, in reality.

The director halts before the completion of an impossible project and asks the studio heads, “if before they brought him into their discussions, he might be permitted to listen to *Ariadne in Naxos* with Elizabeth Schwarzkopf singing the title role.” In this opera, by Richard Strauss, two performances compete with one another; one is by a burlesque group, and the other is an *opera seria*. When the performance schedule is compromised, the two groups are forced to perform at the same time. The young composer of the *opera seria* is seduced by Zerbinetta, played by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, the famous soprano who once sang Zerbinetti’s role, the saucy comedienne and leader of the burlesque group and agrees to cut sections from his musical score. Realizing that this leads to a fiasco in which his work is compromised, he is overcome by despair. Essentially, the opera is about high and low art, the ideal and the real, and the seductions of the real for one inclined toward the ideal.

It is important also that the director thinks about a musical genre instead of a visual one. The abstract nature of music perhaps suggests to the director a way of looking at his film differently. But the studio officials, as if suddenly overcome by a strange compulsion, or, rather, a magic spell, react to the director’s proposal in a startling way: “One person fell down, another broke his little finger. The woman presently quietly pulled out her eyelash.” Thus, Guest writes, “The spell of beauty began to work.” The ideal encounters the real in this witty scene. The studio official mark themselves by altering their bodies, but then, the uniqueness of a jewel, the result, perhaps, of a kind of “defect,” is what allows it to command a higher price. Beauty is ephemeral and elusive because it contains something rare, a “distortion,” which makes it unique, and for this reason it is virtually impossible to embody in its totality as an image on film.

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II

PIERRE GUYOTAT



## I Is an *Other*

### Notes on Pierre Guyotat's *Coma*

From a journal.<sup>1</sup>

April 3, 2015

*In front of my friend, the alternative erupts, the debate, an ancient one for me, between oeuvre and life. The dilemma has lost its power since then: the more I intervene physically in language the more I feel alive; to transform language into Word is a voluntary act, a physical act. There may be a debate between literature and life, but there is none between what I write and life; because what I do is life.* Here is one indication that Guyotat is essentially a religious writer or one who *believes* ... In the beginning there was the Word, and, from this primal Word, this Unutterable Word, which encompasses all languages, from this one, was born a multiplicity of languages. For Guyotat, the transformation of language into the Word is a physical act. In ancient Egyptian mythology, Atum, the primal one, becomes multiple through an act of masturbation, the hand he uses represents the female

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<sup>1</sup> The following is from a journal that I kept while reading Guyotat's *Coma*. All italicized passages here are from *Coma*'s passages.

principle. Language is born of a rupture in the primal unity. To descend, like Orpheus, into the underworld, is a search for Origins, that original unity; Guyotat's "beat sheet"; he literally masturbated while writing his early texts. He crosses the line between the physicality of the body and the immateriality of the words on a page. It is as if he is shutting off the mental critic to engage in a dialogue with the body, so that the words are literally embodied, through a kind of sexual trance where one thing becomes no different from another. I think the crisis in Guyotat's life, which he relates in *Coma* is the inability to cross that line, or to sustain a sense of transcendence.

#### April 4

Guyotat writes of a beating he received by an Algerian man — homosexual pick-up gone wrong? Or was a political motive? He writes, *the brutalization of my being, wounded and in absolute pain, intensifies what I have been resisting with the weapons of youth; the judgment of my father and of general authority; their truth is my mistake; my forfeiture.* The brutality of the Patriarch, the judgment of God even? His is a different Truth. He writes, *I experience all pain (even physical pain or adversity as compensation — and not "punishment" — for some cowardice or other that has not yet been "atoned for": but there is no morality in this, nothing but pure logic, pure material, one weight offsetting the other, the balance of Judgement ...* But who meets out this "compensation"? Why has Guyotat experienced pain as compensation for some imagined cowardly act or something that has not yet been "atoned for"? In this passage, he is carrying the weight, perhaps, of Original Sin, the sin that has not been atoned for but has simply perpetuated guilt and fear of the body, of sexuality.

#### April 5

Ville-d'Avray, July 1977: *I walk with a name that is mine, one I no longer feel inside but which others return to me.* What is

the object before it is named, the body before it is categorized, defined, psychologized, institutionalized, what is the primal body, the “body without organs” or name? But there is the pain of leaving the body behind, the alienation and isolation that is felt when one’s most familiar name is no longer recognizable except in the voice of the other. He is depressed. But he hears the song of a bullfinch, *a song now prohibited, inaccessible*. He is speaking about the problem of language and embodiment. *The word bouvreuil [bullfinch] itself, its roundness of breath and the trembling of the u and the l, such pleasure, such words are now forbidden to me; because of a judgment superior to morality, to Art. Inaccessible*. He concludes that *physical laws keep us apart*. Furthermore, he writes, *the ease of birds, the torment when depression removes you from the world: non-depression is winged feet, whatever the obstacles*. But man is not a bird. He perishes, so does Art ultimately. And yet there is a judgment superior to mortality. We are in the garden of Eden again: apple ... serpent tree ... betrayal. *Flesh was an element of knowledge, but its temptation weakened the strength of spirit and of mind. In that very Cartesian education, both the flesh and the spirit existed, and the idea was to find some kind of balance between them*. Our knowledge of good and evil ultimately made us cowards, unable to act with a pure conscience, conflicted between, on the one hand, an abstract God and the other a physical Christ. Here is the judgment of a God who wrote the Book to test us and ultimately to deceive mankind. Man failed the test, and for his crime was given to suffer and this is the essential condition of living. Guyotat puts it this way: *Caught between that infinite, ‘above,’ and this research of origins ‘below’ that has tormented me since childhood: objects, buildings, ideas; between two infinities to which others are adjoined*.

## April 6

Then comes a moment of transcendence while writing: *When writing, I settle into the central axis of the Earth, my existence, as a humble plowman of language, is grafted onto that axis, onto*

*the axis of that movement, which is more grandiose than human movement alone; the movement of the planet: the rotation of the planet, with its sun and stars: and in this way to elude even the feeling of death.* To conceive the totality of existence in terms that are not merely reducible to the human but expansive; to realize the impossible, to become the ineffable. But here again is that feeling of alienation and isolation as a result of this search for origins: *The more I move back in Time, the more I feel estranged from my "self"; but imagining and setting up that distant world requires the support of a "self" whose power is tenfold: to be that Roman, Greek, Persian, Egyptian, hierodule, or boat carpenter from the Cyclades, means to wrench a past "self" from one's "self" and have it live daily at one's side.*

#### April 7

It is the devotion to that which is not "I" but resides, nevertheless, in a secret part of the self. He writes, *Using the figure of the priest, his sacred hierarchy, I delve back to the origins of the god he serves ... the priest is, and remains, the one who can hear everything — and imagine everything — without any surprise, he is the messenger and ordainer of forgiveness; in what I write, what I might pit against this figure of cold vengeance.* His conscious waking self writes this. Then there is the other which is not "I": *in the text parallel to the Book, written at night, more freely ... a figure appears in the bordello: "Samora Machel," the whore, the Compassionate one, the Light of Night.* For Guyotat writing is an occult practice that at one time involved onanistic pleasures. Guyotat writes, *I am only well when I am what is necessary to be the other* echoing Rimbaud's "I is an other." He continues, *The other, whomever he or she may be, becomes my sole concern.* But this other is also where he wounds himself, *I take on the reasons of that abruptness, injustice, jealousy and most of all, lack of faith — life's desolation: up to the very reasons of its lack of faith, fibrous laziness.* Our lack of faith is a product of our having physical bodies. We cannot really see what is Beyond our

terrestrial vision. Our laziness is woven into our muscles and bones. We are constantly reminded of the limits of bodily form. The body is dependent on food and air and is subject to decay and eventual death. That's why the Buddhists say life is sorrow.

## April 8

But Guyotat's project takes place on a grand scale and drives him to the absolute silencing of the body through starvation, which results in a coma. In this state the body is completely other. This life terminates. Then, later on in the book: *that red, submarine coral traces the inverted border of the fiction I am writing, its occult nature, the movement of its figures caught within the movements of the Great Desire — which is for me, Life, which lies before me when I write, and which I tower over — at ease there, or constrained in their liquid bath ... which is not the mother's local one, but ... who can say it? ... by a superior force that is the preexisting primordial rhythm (the rhythm that creates the world). My figures are born of my language, of that rhythm, in its bath. Inverted because directed backward toward the preexisting primordial rhythm.* He does not use the term "words" but rather "figures" like occult symbols. Words are divested of their semantic baggage and liberated in order to function as a kind of sonic painting. Furthermore, *What have I done, or not done, that I am now so estranged from that centrifugal force of life: procreation ... but the first men, besides procreating, painted.* And then Guyotat talks of the visual sense, the organ of the eye, the importance of this: *We must see ourselves as animals see us ... What seems most universal, most indubitable to my human eye is challenged by other, animal gazes, in their size, their depth and height, or speed. Until the subway cricket, which also sings, teaches me that the most beautiful human music is the most beautiful of all music, I shall be unable to believe it.* It is one of Guyotat's most beautiful passages. In this moment, he desires to see through the eyes of God who sees all things. He is totally invested in the other, the non-human. He explains, "God" *cannot have created the world with human senses; creating a species of insects, of fish, for exam-*

*ple, wouldn't He watch the world through the eyes of the species He is creating? Isn't evolution the trajectory of God's thought, as he thinks creation to come and thinks it as a synthesis of His visions? The trajectory of Evolution = the trajectory of the thought of God the Creator. Then he says, Often what saddens me the most is that the Christian heart has thought of nothing except the human.*

#### April 9

Man is more than the human tasks he sets out to accomplish. His destiny involves more than that. At issue is what Guyotat calls, *God's internal image*, the realization that man mirrors God. But Guyotat concludes, *Man has his voice in the chorus of the Universe, a voice no doubt equal to that of the others, as in a beautiful system of democracy. Man is neither small, nor miserable, he is part of what, for a large part, for an endless part, remains unknown to us.* "Remains unknown to us": Guyotat's incredible desire for the Absolute ends in failure.

#### April 10

*If it were not incumbent upon me to carry my figures to their temporary term, and to continue loving what in the world is not loved, I would wish to be reduced to a pot, without earth nor flowers, reduced to the blade of a spade: even as a child I stare at inanimate, "insentient" objects and envy their state: rocks, motor parts, even words, abstract ones, especially from philosophy. His love ... draws me to the humblest of objects: scrap, school notebooks in public dumps, the gaze of children, the dribble of idiots, those are what can be looked at in full; art objects, antiques, the gaze of adults, books, monuments, harvests, all of that constitutes a reality for others. Text aside, what elevated discourse I take on, be it reasoning, the expression of learning, is as if spoken by someone other than me, speaking, explaining, persuading, even. My distress is already inexpressible; I want it undetectable by others in my voice. Who can really express what is inside himself or herself using the language in its present state? Isn't it rather that we only*

present surfaces, substitutes, simulating what is essentially unsayable, which is the truth of us all, that we are alone? How can explain the reason for this without falling into existentialist clichés? For Guyotat, there is the unknown, the absent god, the occasional flickers of a beyond detectable in the traces of language; Guyotat attempts to cross over that line dividing the corporeal from the immaterial and thus to have knowledge of God. It is a Promethean quest. How can Guyotat give voice to such an impossible mission? What is its object? How can he resolve “the above” with that which is “below”?

#### April 11

Guyotat writes, *What other subject can I provide than one so related to my writing: through subverted morality—inverted hierarchy, debauched innocence, scorned maternity: disappearance of the human into the non-human, continuous sexual use.* Here “human” stands for the Man of Reason, the “non-human” stands for that which is *other*. Continual sexual subversion is a reduction of the human to the animal, which perhaps leads to a realization that man is not superior to an animal just as God is not superior to man. At the core of this project is the *transformation of the language, the voice of the young Dauphin, then of the young king (scene of his proclamation as king and of his mother kneeling at the Temple upon hearing of his father’s decapitation), into the language and voice of the people. A kind of intoned metaphor of the tragedy issuing from within myself, inside my art, inside myself, issuing from the transformation of my writing into language—before, later, after coma, into Word.* In this project, he continues the search for origins. There is the problem of language. How can language function in such a way that it embodies the primal Word? How to make the body issue from the voice, the god materialize before you? What invocation to use? We are in occult territory.

## April 12

*So many individual, collective lives from which I am shut out. I feel this separation even more as I, since childhood, cannot get used to the fact that it is impossible to embrace, in one human life, each of the billions and millions of human lives, those ongoing and those in the process of being born, as I cannot see an illuminated window without feeling the regret, the rage of not being among those living there — and wolfing down the soup. In addition to which the billions of billions of billions of so-called animal lives to be lived, died, “birthed” then ... It is an astonishing passage. The desolation and alienation of the human is terrifying. The limits of the physical body that separate us from others, not only other humans, or animals, but even those who have died and those in the process of being born ... Guyotat exposes the infinite distance we are, not only from God or from an Absolute, but from others, despite our attempts to connect, language providing no outlet to accurately convey what we think or feel. We are in the desert despite the enormity of our desire for the beyond ... for contact, for an ecstatic moment of transcendence where the totality of existence is within our grasp and comprehension ... to see with the eyes of God!*

## April 13

*Here it is again, the human problem: that interior game between an illness I have known since childhood to afflict all humans at once, namely to be nothing but that, human in a mineral, vegetable, animal, divine world, and a recovery that no one would desire, that would deprive me, if it were to succeed, of all courage, all desire, all the pleasure of pushing ever beyond, ever onward — and which, having long known where my interests lie, I do not want. But the written word is his only lifeline to the living.*

## April 14

Here is something that reminds me of Artaud's railings against doctors: *In the same movement, they also do a poor operation on the frenulum breve of the penis. To distract me from my core affliction; and entertain themselves there.* Artaud also hated the idea of birth and believed that every newborn simply perpetuated the evil that was life itself. Artaud recoiled from sexuality, hated it with a vengeance. Guyotat describes the site of sexuality as a "sore affliction." The problem is similar in Guyotat, who is aware of the limitations of the human body and suffers because his desires cannot be realized: he cannot extend beyond his corporeal form ... his desire is for the Absolute, he wants to steal from God his sound.

## April 15

But the tragic human condition grounds him against his will: *Living with others is impossible, yet if you give yourself up to them, you disappear in them. And thus I have disappeared into my fictive figures, into the Italian ones, into those closest to me, and who draw from me what they dare not draw from God himself ... I see the struggle that each being wages to live. Then, To refound the self in the place, the time and the state of the human, in the full light of day, and with others around living fully in that light, is perhaps natural for humans attuned, but is a vain task for those who have ceased to be.* Guyotat is estranged from the human universe, that part of the world, *laden with noise, with light, with smells, lies at such a remove from my feeble body that I feel how inefficient it is to recover what I have lost ... during the hiatus of the world, I can think it natural that I stop as well—and yet I do not sleep.* Guyotat's crisis is a spiritual one. He feels distant from the world of light, of noise, of life. At this point he is beginning to lose weight, the body seems to rebel against his spiritual longing, his desire for a vast communion with all of existence. In order to consummate such a work, the body must reduce to a kind of singularity, a black hole that can absorb anything

and everything. He cannot sleep, sleep brings with it dreams, the body seems unreal. But insomnia has this effect, *Insomnia, and the pressure of light on the window panes, on my heart, runs stake through my chest, and leaves me taut, in the early morning, upon the bunk from which I spring, formerly, desert, plateaus, torrents, Roman ruins, forests, town centers, with such joy for work or travel ahead, alone or against others ...* His anxiety proves to him that he is in the world ... He speaks of the creative process as a kind of magical act that can give birth to his text, *painting guides my hand and my future creation is in my interior gaze.* His figures have *depth like a painting of Creation* and it is up to him to *animate them now, to have them speak without lifting an eye from them. But how can I make them speak from my mute throat?*

#### April 16

Then comes a key into Guyotat's state of mind: *And, haunted as I am by History, by Prehistory, by Evolution, not only for the human, but also for the animal, the vegetable, the mineral, the object, how can I resolve to make a figure appear for the sole reason of action or of "art"? I must have superior reasons, a more distant logic, so that the figures emerge from my "breast" at least, just as they do for the Creator, so that they surface from what I sense of my infinitude. Thus, they rise from that rhythm-mass, and must remain linked to it, undifferentiated momentum and result.* Earlier I was thinking about the problem between art and life. Some dispense with the written word in favor of direct action, whether it is in performance art or the staging of some protest, or interactive artwork, etc. ... But these arguments don't really concern Guyotat. His interest isn't in distinctions between words and action and his project cannot be merely categorized as "Art." Guyotat belongs in the tradition of the great martyrs and saints of the Medieval period. I envision him walking down a rain-soaked and filthy side street in the late afternoon in Medieval Paris, a famous flagellant, the red marks of the whip like railroad tracks down his back. His "language" must emerge from the Origin, that "rhythm-mass," and remain unsullied and

“undifferentiated” in its momentum from the Source. In order to perform such an act, he must wrench the power from God himself by sensing his own “infinite,” he must go beyond the merely human, in order to achieve a kind of pure transmission. But, of course, a state of purity threatens to infect the human. A God is the opposite of a human. There is always the danger of infection and death.

#### April 17

Guyotat writes, *To nomadize is to make oneself available to all, to those who are close to us but especially to strangers.* The movement for Guyotat is Outward, the desire to make contact with the other. *It is also to forget the self, increasingly; the self that is the true enemy and that still remains, unfortunately—and for how long—the backing of creation ... As long as my communist commitment lasts, having learned to see with the first images of the death camps, I rule out the violence of revolution and yet the revolution is, for me, a new man, with new sentiments, and perhaps as well, if I carry the whole thing to its logical conclusion, a disappearance of feeling that might begin with the inversion of feelings, their subversion. The depth of that movement, even though it hurts me, is plain to see if you pause an instant on what the work I do shows and proves: a world overturned.* “Continual sexual use ...,” the transgression of normative values, the creation of a new man, Artaud’s man “without organs,” the “inversion of feelings,” the end of reproduction, the stripping away of false consciousness, the lie that is the body; but there is the pain of withdrawal from the material toward the spiritual, it results in an apocalypse of reason. *The self is the true enemy;* one’s own selfish reasons no longer matter, the stability of the self is in danger; Guyotat is seeking nothing less than the transformation of man and the world. *As long as you are thinking, you cannot die.*

## April 18

*There is a kind of imbalance between how small we are athletically and the enormity of the cerebral network of which we are the seat, and the enormity of the impulse toward the more that we are through the heart. The skeleton, the organs themselves are worth nothing. What is of value is the network. The essence of things, the thing in itself, what is intrinsic no longer counts, only the consequences count ... we only see the consequences.* Guyotat wants to penetrate to the essence of things. He wants to know *the being of a thing, its origin, the movement toward what preexists even morality, toward a before* — “God.” Is such knowledge possible, can we travel to a time before the human, before language, before even “God”? Can such a time or place be conceived of? Can one access those primordial waters? This is to beat God at his own game, to change the rules, to access the secret of creation, to be able to invent a new world. “No God but Man” is what the alchemists say. This is the highest magick; and magick is a language where each *figure* is charged with occult meaning.

## April 19

It is rare in this present time to see an author who is so concerned with the problem of being, the ontological problem, which is the essential problem of philosophy. So much has been taken for granted about the self or the body in Western thought. Guyotat writes, *Ideologues themselves, those who are labeled philosophers and who probably suffer from the disappearance of being, do not deal with being but with society in which beings must cope. Action is forgotten as well. It seems that the only thing that counts are the words with which all people manifest that they wish to stay away from being or action.* It is Guyotat’s desire to usurp the power of God, and this leads to his primary transgression against the body, the limits of the body, the border of reality, *because of the way I am, it is never “I” that is insulted, beaten, pushed away, but, in my self, something of the surface, a physical, interdependent reality, or an historical, even metaphysical soli-*

*darity; the only thought I have ever had of myself is as a medium, an intermediary, a messenger ... the one who brings light or who restores it to the heart of another.* The secret reserve, the sense of his own infinitude, drives him onward in pursuit of a language ... the problem of faith, how to achieve spiritual purity: starvation, the ecstasy of the saints, the flagellants wandering in the dark streets ...

## April 20

*And yet, save for what tortures me, the artistic solution to be found, nothing wounds me more in the brief recurrences of my emotional self than the incapacity of others, sometimes those closest to me, to see, to understand the effort that I extend to live, to renew with life. ... It hurts that people closest to me look at me with the same eyes as yesterday (but no matter, we must push onward): the very idea of infinitude is affected. Nothing less than an "interior transformation" is at stake ... and then, I sometimes feel that I am defecating skins from my throat and from my tongue, and then my tongue itself ... In a dream, Guyotat says to his mother, whose death affected him greatly, *mother, take me back (to nonexistence, because even if you were to abort me, my human soul, recreated through you, would join a new hell) ... To deny the procreative function, the "core affliction," the "phantom leg"... fearing perhaps, it's in the air, that by wrecking her, I might wreck what makes me live — create — she refuses me her main entry, which my member desires, and deviates it toward her mouth, toward her voice ... will I suffer this lack of completion to no end? ... with Agnes's knife all I can do is cut my own throat ... out of revolt against all that is forsaking me (my mother's God, my mother herself — God's will for me and grace: must I withstand the test of all true artists, of the gesture of their spirit, which designates their exception, that cruel passage without the assistance of He who wanted what I am, and of she who carried me to become it) ... Guyotat is in the desert wandering alone under a fierce and merciless sun that beats on his head like a hammer ... vomiting through my mute mouth the inverted remains of my body,**

*with its memory, its ancient and future actions, its disappearance ... to become the body without organs, mere shanks / but ready to carry out / their apocalypse / for they have spoken / too much of it to be born / and spoken too much in birth / not to be reborn / and / take on body / at last / authentically ... calling out / to the ambient spaces / to rise up / and speak — Artaud. To go before birth, to remember the child, the first screams of the newborn. I latch onto the newborn asleep in the gleam of the night-light, I grasp onto its faraway odor, and its mewling, onto the faraway, changing odors of its tossing in the crib ... but everything excludes me from life: life, even. Not even the newborn child, the emerging life, with its joy and possibility, its innocence, can bring any relief or hope for the future.*

#### April 21

Guyotat seeks a prelapsarian world, before the biblical Fall, before the test in the garden ... his is nothing less than an attempt to recover the essence of this lost world, to go back before time, before space, everything reduced to a singularity, a black hole, to absorb everything back into the steaming pool, to close the mystical egg, and to watch it vanish into oblivion. *Am I not one of those heroes, semi-gods, future celestial bodies, children borne of goddesses and men, of gods and women, or of women and beasts, momentarily led back to the surface and to life by its judgment?* Is it the shame of Adam and Eve, their knowledge of good and evil, the morality that spread from that choice, that keeps us bound in a complex relation with the material body, unable to lessen its weight, and to fly ... what were we before this happened, what was Paradise?

#### April 22

To sense that infinitude which resides deep in ourselves, to know that we only represent surfaces of a greater need, barely spoken, but that we are all aware of. *Across from me, my friends, their friends, they are of another species, or rather, they belong*

*to a species: I, myself, belong to none.* Here is the vast desert, silent except for the occasional breeze, there is nothing for miles and miles, it is impossible to tell where you are, someone calls out your name, but you don't recognize it as your own, you say, "why God have you banished me and left me to die on this earth, rather than residing among the stars, in eternal flight towards the source of all being, O my terrible remorse ..."

#### April 23

*How can I grow seasoned to the reality of my language, to the language of my being before I am myself? How can I appease the fear it causes me, the fear of the Unknown? ... I suffer but one pain, this language, I know its beauty is too hard for me already, too strong, and yet it moves me within with science and pleasure, but how I would prefer to us a language directly readable by all (and yet ...) ... it is the language of an artist too strong for the human being that I still am: of a prophet of myself then.* How is language supposed to embody the unutterable, how can this language accommodate what is ineffable, how can the unsayable be understood by all? What is a "language for the people"? What is a language of the "soul"? How can the material body perform a spiritual gesture without the extreme pain, mental or physical, of the body's annihilation? Does the body wither as it transforms into a spirit?

#### April 24

Guyotat wants to learn the secret of Death. He is Orpheus in the Underworld, *Letting my body go, letting my life cross what we call death, that I no longer see: the solution lies beyond that crossing salvation — if it is nothing but a soul raw against society, how can a body die that loses its existence with its weight?* Does the soul die along with the body? And what lies on the other side, *Beyond, on the other side, the ideal Grammarian, the Decipherer and the Pronouncer, for all.* There is no such purity in the language as it stands. What we have is a corrupt language, a lan-

guage of empty signs, a tower of babel. The Word remains inaccessible, unknown and unpronounceable. For Guyotat, finding the language to express his world, his desire, is the source of his pain. *It is unbearable ... that the simple inscription on the page, the simple reading of the printed lines does not allow for understanding, for beauty! I am here, on this field of the dead, crushed by the ordinary reader I have become.* How can we change the way we read, the rules of grammar, the flow of words on a page, how can we change the way we see, comprehend, determine meaning in a sentence, all in accordance with a spiritual desire. What are these underlying rules we subconsciously obey that cut us off from realizing the Word? Language circumscribes our world; we are told that if we don't have the words to say what we mean, that the thought doesn't exist in the mind, and there is the overreliance on the linguistic sense, but what was the angelic language, what finally does it mean to be an "ordinary reader" and what if the writer wants to speak about a world which the present language has no way of conveying? Does it or does it not exist? Is it a futile project: *I write on the page of a notebook — is it writing, or is it instead drawing, a sign, a formula? Lines overlap, grow blurred like the simultaneities of a moment of thought, at the time I feel my writing is ash and that if I tip the page the ash will slide along with its meaning — the plea I bury under the gravel. ... How could a doctor, even very learned, understand that my exhaustion proceeds from torture that is purely of an artistic nature?*

April 25

*The empathy that rules me, and against which I have since childhood attempted to oppose my reason, mocks me, nudges me from one identity to another, superimposes them and places as well.* The movement for Guyotat is always away from himself toward the other, the alien, the foreign, the animal, and this is such an elemental force, born of empathy, that it assumes these disparate identities. Reason is our inheritance from the age of the Enlightenment, or even father back, we can speak of the Greeks and the Romans. But they had their disobedient gods, the poet be-

ing foremost in his rebellion against Reason, and just as Reason acts in opposition, insisting you are [enter your name here] and cannot be an *other*, the poet counters this claim and insists that "I is an other." *Everything is high-level work and pleasure* for the "superior beings," their brains full of inventions, their gestures as light as their feelings.

## April 26

But Guyotat is concerned with an age before the existence of man. He is not of this world. His father shows him a photo of a pier, 1939. In the photo his mother is there. His father says, *we conceived you there, the following night, your mother and I, my heart instantly starts racing and palpitates as if bound to another: I was, I am, in that thinking womb, before being there; before that human "conception," I am.* To imagine the state before birth, before that human "conception" that he would become, the fully formed man, with limbs, blood flowing through the veins, a mind wrapping itself around objects, then advancing to more sophisticated thoughts, then to the idea of God, of totality, the mysteries of Catholicism, but the *internal sexual rupture was an effect of my belief in Christ, triggered by the notion that he is both man and God ... human and divine the trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit combined in a single God*, an abstract entity and at the same time there is the carnal and sexual imagery of the crucifixion, a charged physical image, this is sadomasochistic. So on the one hand an abstraction and on the other a material image; the body is limited, the spirit infinite. *The closer I get to the end, the more I give to all, as if to lessen, reduce the distance between everybody who will live, and me who will disappear. I give as an inverse movement, contrary to what the living do as they heap the dead with bare necessities.*

*What I write, what I've been able to do and to experience, is a question of being. Much more than the body, being is what torments me, if I can use the word torment for this. I mean quite simply the fact that we exist. ... This isolation, the contempt in which we hold those empty, useless objects fills me with a compas-*

*sion of reason and sentiment that is equal, and at times superior, to the one I feel for humans and for those we call animals. ... The question of the animal is not, for me, a moral issue. It's an issue of Reason. The strongest and most violent things do not pass through common sense, they pass through Reason. Sometimes I hear discussions, on the radio and in other places that profoundly shock me. You hear someone making very astute cultural analysis and, all of a sudden, the same person affirms that the animal is an inferior being who must serve man, in the name of I don't know what situation of sacred confrontation (because the sacred must be everywhere, of course) with the "beast." ... The exclusion from life is unbearable; the exclusion of criminals is unbearable as well. The body losing weight, all the drugs, the despair, isolation, obsession, "flesh nothing but flesh," but the spirit, what of the spirit? Why must I whip the body in order for the soul to speak, to attempt speech? How can we live, seeing things that do not exist, hearing sounds that do not exist, touch objects that do not exist? How can one live according to faith, how can one believe in a God, how can one quench this need, this longing for an Absolute, which is so strong it threatens to overwhelm your entire being. One is plunged in an abyss, growing more distant from Him the more one yearns for Him. The rupture widens, but in the end, Guyotat provoked Him and went farther, into sin, in order to speak.*

April 27

*Must I move farther back in time to an era before writing, as if to surprise it from behind, before its hieroglyphs, in its signs, their meaning erased by History, like my own signs whose secret will disappear along with me? ... Better to die (as a child can "die") than not be multiple, infinitely multiple. There is the great need to belong and thus to be multiple, to lose oneself in the arms of the Infinite.*

April 28

Guyotat writes of the “core affliction,” the rupture caused by the penis being withdrawn from the woman’s vagina, the attraction to the male body, a sexual conflict in terms of what society finds bearable, since it cannot codify a double sex, or understand *the idea of depriving oneself of what one loves, of what one can take pleasure from, in order to make something even stronger, to make use of this contained jouissance in order to make something yet more powerful, the idea, also, that one is this, and that, and that, is also impossible to assimilate today.* Indeed, the idea of what constitutes the “human” underwent a major transformation in the twentieth century with the dominance of digital technology. The “new man” seems to be just visible at the horizon line of contemporary science. But we have a long way to go if we are really to consider a model like Artaud’s “body without organs” or, in Guyotat’s work, the idea of a man with new sentiments and perceptions achieved through the subversion of feeling. *Making people believe that if they think one thing they cannot think another is a form of violence.*

[In the hospital.]

*My eye cracks open, once again, and the vision of a carton of fruit juice, Rhea, the grip of that mother goddess, wife of time, takes me back by force toward Antiquity, the “minus” period of the time before the birth of Jesus Christ: the time of death? That false time before Christ, that space-time on the edge of which this medical treatment keeps me hovering.* This makes me think of Artaud’s Bardo state, that period between life and death, in the Hindu *Book of the Dead*, where the body is in a transitional space, and subject to demon influence before its passage into the next world. Guyotat reads, *the graphs moving upon the monitors of the equipment plugged into my heart and brain, before my eyes that part with difficulty, so shrunken have my eyelid muscles become, draw the trace, the proof of my historical trajectories. Everything, during the year, that I have suffered to foresee is accomplished.* Now dependent on drugs, hooked up to machines in the hospital, his body shrunken through starvation,

brought to an extreme point, now fully conscious of the body's reduced weight, he begins to hallucinate images of the ancient gods, drawing him back to the origin of the world, or perhaps back into his mother's womb, to a time before his own birth, before being forced through a canal and thrown into the world, screaming and even at that time resistant, nevertheless being drawn out into the light, the light that blinds, the very light that is the sign of God that will eventually split into two opposing forces, the light standing for the sacred, the darkness for the profane, and a massive rupture will be felt deep in the body, from the erect member, the desire for women and the desire for men will be born. Christ on the cross, the mysteries of his birth from a virgin's womb, his resurrection, etc. — all this produces from this rupture a profound yearning, a desire to transcend the limits of the body, to achieve a state of *raw soul*, to cross from the materiality of language to the purity of the soul, to God, in order to speak in the language of God.

But in the end his attempt to break from the social order, to sanctify his vocation, and to link these two disparate sexual obsessions through a sacred and carnal practice, invites an inversion of desire, a transgression into sin, and a descent into the darkest abyss of human degradation. To witness the body degraded and to reject the humanistic ideas of human grandeur and to alter the language, to shorten words, create alternative spellings, excessive use of apostrophes, diacritical marks, and symbols, adopts a linguistic radicality that takes language to an extreme point and initiates a profound and overwhelming despair, a questioning of the artistic process itself, a rejection of former works. Yet after a near death experience comes the birth of a new man.

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III

HENRY JAMES AND  
FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY



A Lamentation As Old As  
Recorded Language  
On Henry James's *Selected Tales*

As John Lyon writes in his introduction to the *Selected Tales*, "James's writing gathers its energy from increasing uncertainty." Implicit in James's work is this sense of the unsayable, a certain irreducible *not*, a void at the center of a text which acts as an agent of dissimulation and dispersal. It impels the characters to speak as if they are piecing together some thought, framing that which remains just at the edge of articulation. Their words remain as if etched in shadow, or written on water. What appears clearly said is in fact overwhelmed by ambiguity. The words are holding back more than they are bringing to light. The characters are attempting, in their dialogue, to illuminate a point that remains hidden. For example, take this dialogue from "The Beast in the Jungle." Marcher speaks first and May second.

"Then tell me if I shall consciously suffer."

"Never."

"Well what's better than that? Do you call that the worst?"

"You think nothing is better?"

"Why not if one doesn't know?"

"I see ... If I don't suffer!"

“You see what?”

“Why what you mean — what you’ve always meant.”

“What I mean isn’t what I’ve always meant. It’s different.”

For Marcher knowledge is suffering, *vide*, Nietzsche. It is Marcher’s lack of knowledge that leads his thinking astray such that he can’t register the truth of May Bartram’s words. This is not merely a misunderstanding. James writes, “Her whole attitude was a virtual statement, but the perception of that seemed called to take its place for him as one of the many things *necessarily* crowded out of his consciousness.” They are speaking a foreign language. Consciousness is in fact a stumbling block to mutual understanding.

It has been remarked that James’s characters are ill-defined in any conventional or realistic way or, that in his description of them, James creates the illusion of definition without saying anything definitive about them. James writes in “The Pupil” that “Morgan had been as puzzling as a page in an unknown language.” In “The Lesson of the Master,” Henry St. George is described as a “text . . . a style considerably involved, a language not easy to translate at sight.” The characters reveal as much as they hold back, never enough to characterize them sufficiently in the reader’s mind. They are ciphers. They exhibit what they are not and when they are most *like* themselves, they offer a portrait subject to illegibility and confusion.

James is not a social novelist or realist of manners. Instead, the nature of unreality or the problems that arise between art and reality are the governing subjects of these works. The work itself is a closed space with James everywhere present. James gives a clue to this highly subjective methodology in “The Lesson of the Master.” Paul Overt is talking to Miss Faucourt. She says, “You talk just like people in your book.” He responds by saying, “Then they must all talk alike.” James, in his works, is in dialogue with himself. The atmosphere in these tales is compressed, almost suffocating, claustrophobic. James does not characterize in the sense of creating stock psychological figures

with reference to a “real world.” Yes, there are rooms, people speaking inside them, events happening, but James only gives us the appearance of reality. This is from “The Real Thing”: “I liked things that *appeared*. Whether they were or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question.” In “The Lesson of the Master,” a character says, “I am not concerned with the relative ... only the absolute.” James’s aestheticism gives his work a sense of refinement, almost a kind of rigidity — there is little movement at the center. A reader is conscious only of mouths speaking, disembodied. One waits for the revelation from the dialogue, but it never comes except piecemeal, if at all. The unsayable reigns. This quality indirectly explains James’s style. It has the appearance of fluidity but is in fact governed by self-control, a rigidity that circumscribes a space but fails to define a center, thus hiding more than it reveals. His “prose lines” are carefully checked. One doesn’t get the sense, as in Proust, of a building up of words to great a kind of elaborate architecture. In James, the “buildup” is inward. There is a force which clamps down on language rather than releasing the free expression of a thought. It shackles an unruly beast, the “unconscious.” Take for example James’s use of commas where the pauses are quick, achieving an almost staccato effect:

Marcher’s theory that these elements in contact with which he himself revived, had suffered, on this occasion, it may be granted, a marked, an excessive check.

The use of commas here is like Marcher’s own “excessive check.” They delimit a space, check direct expression. The breath is truncated, fragmented, indecisive. James worked on his tales repeatedly, often making significant changes after the first version was published. His style is intellectual. His prose line is governed by the mind; it is the music of thought delayed. The above example suggests a mind in torment, or uncertain, or hiding something. It is not natural but artificial speech. A “personality” is erased. But the personal is not wholly absent in James’s work. Its function is to create an ambiguity in the text. It is present as

an absence. In "The Lesson," Miss Faucourt says, "For one who looks at it from the artistic point of view it contains a bottomless ambiguity." The work of art is not a direct representation of reality but instead fundamentally ambiguous.

Because of a disdain for the materialism that was prevalent in the late nineteenth century, many artists strove to create the pure art object, unsullied by the material of this world; they wanted to escape from reality. Their art would not be practical or functional, nothing but itself. The self becomes apart from the world, divested from the governing morality of the world, beyond good and evil. James's fictional world is morally equivocal. Motivations are unclear, often suspect, perhaps negative, or even destructive. This ambiguity extends to the moral universe. There is the betrayal in "The Lesson of the Master." The relation of the parents to the child in "The Pupil." Mrs. Hopewell wishing for her own death in order to avenge the abasement of the Northmores. Intentions are not clearly delineated so they remain morally ambiguous.

James gives a clue to his treatment of the intellectual and the emotional in "The Figure in the Carpet." The narrator says, "And a little intelligence might spoil it?" The author, Vereker, responds, "Well, you've got a heart in your body. Is that an element of form or an element of feeling? What I contend that nobody has ever mentioned in my work is the organ of life." So too, life appears in James's works, but it is not real life, it is an artificial life, a work of Art. This explains the almost static quality at the center of James's tales. These are not real persons but static objects, as if in a painting, oriented in a closed space, speaking with all the vagueness and enigmatic quality that emanates from a self-portrait. There is no direct movement in James's characters, only a groping towards something about which, perhaps, they are not fully aware. What sustains interest for the reader is this void, this absence around which James's characters speak. One doesn't get in James the adherence to a palpable reality that one, for example, gets in Proust. Comparatively, Proust is a more sensual writer. But Proust is concerned with psychol-

ogy and emotion, that which motivates actions. James keeps us mostly in the dark, especially with regard to emotional states and motives. In “The Death of the Lion,” Lady Augusta says, “I dare say she is — she’s so awfully clever. But what’s the use of being a Princess —” and the narrator finishes her sentence, “If you can’t dissemble your love?” It’s not in the best interest of a Princess to convey her thoughts about love to a potential mate. For May Bartram, in “The Beast in the Jungle,” her love remains unspoken. Only in death does she manage to articulate something real to Marcher. Her absence says more to him than her presence ever did. The surge of meaning overwhelms no less for being sudden. But there was a moment when she attempted to be clear to him about how she felt:

She was right, incontestably, for what he saw in her face was the truth, and strangely, without consequence, while their talk of it was dreadful, she appeared to present it as inordinately soft. This, prompting bewilderment, made him gape the more gratefully for her revelation, so that they continued for some minutes silent, her face shining at him, her contact imponderably pressing, and his stare all kind but all expectant.

This is the climactic moment after which there is no other choice for Mary Bartram but to turn away from him; she is resigned to her fate. But it is at this moment that she is most present to him, in her own mind, even though to him she is not. He, ironically, sees in her face, “the truth,” but it eludes him as an unreadable text. What she presents to him confounds his expectation and so he remains locked in the prison house of his own consciousness and thus cannot read her. This blindness constitutes his betrayal. But it also seals his fate; it leads to his confrontation with the Beast inside himself. The Beast is this lack, this void. James writes, “The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived.” This *knowledge* of failure, “at least, belated and bitter, had something of the taste of life.” “The Beast in the Jungle” finds James at his most lyrical and orphic. Eurydice is

lost forever as a result of Orpheus's gaze. The unutterable resists our modes of appropriation in language. Apollo is pure form, the visible, the sayable. The Dionysian is that which is formless, that which precedes speech. In "The Lesson of the Master," Paul says, "Are there no women who really understand — who can take part in a sacrifice?" The Master replies, "How can they take part? They are the sacrifice. They're the idol and the altar and the flame." Marcher sacrifices May out of blindness. "The Beast in the Jungle" can be read as a sequel to "The Lesson of the Master." In the latter tale, Paul Overt is seen as being governed by an intellectual passion rather than an emotional one. The Dionysian represents the unconscious. Paul's anxiety and fear at the end is that his sacrifice for the intellect puts into question whether or not the Master is able to write a book. The suggestion is that the Master, writing in a more personal mode, may still be able to complete the book. In Nietzschean terms, the conflict is made explicit. Here is the Dionysian manifesting as anxiety, an ambiguous emotional state that weakens the stability of Apollonian form.

In "The Beast in the Jungle," the Dionysian overwhelms the Apollonian. The Beast is the unpredictability and ferocity of nature. It is the emotion that erupts in Marcher, sundering the bars of the Apollonian, so that he succumbs to an irrational emotion: he literally hallucinates the presence of a Beast, it causes him to leap onto the face of the tomb. May arises, from the dead, so to speak, and takes in death what she could not have in life. One thinks of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" of the *Liebestod*. There is in James's work the late-Romantic preoccupation with death as a mode of transcendence. Stefan Brand, in Max Ophüls's film "Letter to an Unknown Woman," based on a short story by Stefan Zweig, suffers a similar fate as Marcher. Here, when Stefan realizes the author of the mysterious letter is the woman he knew many years ago, who loved him without his even being aware of that love, he confronts the Beast. This knowledge is deadly. He accepts a duel he could not possibly win from the husband of his lover, who remarried many years later and who has discovered his wife's love for him. Knowledge leads to suf-

fering and death. The following is a quote from Maurice Blanchot, writing on James's "The Turn of the Screw":

The marvelous and terrible moment which the act of writing exercises on truth, torture, violence which finally lead to death where everything appears to be revealed, where everything however falls back into doubt and the void of the shadows.

Henry James is a master of these shadows that obscure speech and cause suffering, the only relief from which comes as an expression of grief. It is a lamentation as old as recorded language.

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## The Logic of Kirilov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Devils*

The teachings of Descartes initiated the tendency for contemplative man to turn his thinking upon itself: *Cogito ergo sum*. With these words begin Man's inversion of his attention upon the workings of the self in order to understand his world. Such introspection alienates the self from an integration with the external world, the result of which is a kind of spiritual emptiness. Descartes writes, "I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me." Nonetheless, he was able to provide a rational explanation for the existence of God. An even more radical separation between self and external reality occurred with Kant. According to him, consciousness forms the world. What the self can know is the world as phenomena, idea, but it is ever divorced from the realization of the *noumenal*, the thing in itself. Both Descartes and Kant initiated the kind of thought inversion that is at the heart of Man's search for self-knowledge and meaning in the world.

I am concerned here with an explanation of the madness and suicide of Kirilov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Devils*. I contend that it is just such a kind of rigorous introspection, a logic to the point of madness, which causes Kirilov, an engineer, to commit suicide. It is a logic that will admit no emotional intervention. In order to develop my argument, I will discuss some of

the implications of Kant's metaphysics and some of the eventual paradoxes that cause the self to become entangled in an infinite loop of thought. If indeed consciousness forms the world then the following must be true: The world cannot confine consciousness because it is defined by consciousness; consciousness arises from itself because it cannot be created by the world which is a product of consciousness; and finally the analyses of consciousness must reveal all the mysteries of the world, indeed the mystery of the whole of Being as well as the nature of itself because the world is defined by consciousness. But if we turn thinking upon itself, hold up the Cartesian *cogito* to a kind of mirror which is the introspective mind, we recognize the development of a subtle paradox. Analyses of consciousness places consciousness in the empirical world, the world of cause and effect, and thus it loses its freedom as a world constituting entity. Furthermore, if we think of the mind as a creator of the world and of the Kantian categories being an explanation of the limits of knowledge, then a profound paradox arises: if these categories are the true limits of knowledge, then it should not be possible to know them. With what do we contrast them and how do we know them as limits and also how can they show up as knowable categories within the very world they themselves define? Briefly, in the words of Wittgenstein, "in order to draw a limit to thinking, we should have to think about both sides of this limit." The result of this introspection — this thinking about the act of thinking itself — is a kind of extreme solipsism, the sense of which drives Kirilov to madness and suicide.

Kirilov's solipsism is hinted at when he says, "If there is no god then I am god." This is the essence of his reasoning, the frightful realization of which causes him to become alienated from the world and from himself. For Kirilov there is no god since there is no transcendental being to which he can look for relief from the anxiety of life. Kirilov himself constitutes the world. He is at the center of the universe and also the outer limit of it and consequently takes upon himself the responsibility for its fate. Through his suicide he believes he will cause the world

to undergo a “physical transformation” and become a world of kings. In Kirilov’s world there is no god, yet he is god. He is the world and is thus its god, the transcendental Being. The self forms the world so there can be nothing outside it, but the self also transcends the world and is its god. Kirilov says, “All man did was invent God so as to live without killing himself.” For Kirilov, man created a Being that transcended him in order that he would not bear the burden of the entire world. Kirilov carries the logic that is rooted in the teachings of Descartes and Kant to a frightening end.

With the realization that there is no god and yet that he himself is god, Kirilov says, “the attribute of my divinity is — Self Will.” Kirilov is determined to assert what he calls the “most important part” of his Self Will, which is suicide. He must assert his new “terrible freedom.” He says:

I am bound to believe that I do not believe ... the only salvation for all is to prove this idea to everyone. Who will prove it? I! I cannot understand how an atheist could know that there is no god and not kill himself at once! To realize that there is no god and not to realize at the same instant that you have become god yourself is an absurdity, for else you would certainly kill yourself. If you do realize it, you are a king and you will never kill yourself but will live in the greatest glory. But he who is the first to realize it is bound to kill himself, for otherwise who will begin and prove it? It is I who will most certainly kill myself to begin with and prove it ... And I shall save. Only this will save mankind and will transform it physically in the next generation.

It is clear that Kirilov’s solipsism results from a rigid introspection and the resulting contradictions cause his logic to become maniacal. The logic of this engineer consumes the paradox and becomes a logic of self-destruction.

In order to further understand the nihilistic logic that motivates Kirilov, it is necessary to come to terms with the extended quote above. In it Kirilov further explains the necessity of self-

destruction and its implications for mankind. In order to do so, I will use some of the ideas of the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Fichte explained that the external world is a manifestation of the internal self. He writes, "I see (consciousness) my own vision (the thing of which I am conscious)." Thus, the external world is but a reflection of consciousness: I am conscious of the thing of which I am conscious. This idea echoes the philosophies of Descartes and Kant. As thought turns further in upon itself it becomes evident to Fichte that, "I ought to say, 'The thought appears that I think, feel, perceive,' but I cannot say, 'I think, feel, perceive.'" A further descent into the self yields the profoundly disconcerting result that consciousness is fragmented. Consciousness itself becomes a reflection, a representation. Finally, if solipsism suggests that our immediate experience of the world is all that constitutes the reality of the world, then it may well seem that one can only accept the experience of a *reflection* of the self—and not a truly singular independent self—as the true reality. The self becomes unbounded in the world. It becomes a meaningless shadow among the shadows of the external world.

Kirilov's words suggest that he suffers from the kind of unanchoring of the self in the world that Fichte describes above. It leads to an overbearing and self-fragmenting solipsism. For Kirilov the thought appears that he does not believe, but he cannot say that he does not believe and thus cannot believe that he does not believe. This is the terrible vertigo that Kirilov experiences at the periphery of the abyss. Only through the act of suicide will he make manifest that he believes that he does not believe, that he *cannot* believe. Spiritual emptiness and the death of the soul give birth to this frightening logic. Kirilov himself explains something of this logic when he speaks of his friend Stavrogin, "Stavrogin too was eaten up by an idea. . . . If Stavrogin believes in god, then he does not believe that he believes. And if he doesn't believe, then he doesn't believe that he doesn't believe." When the self goes underground in the world it becomes transient, fluid, perhaps giving rise to conflicting

thoughts and indecision. Uncertainty becomes its trademark. One can only be certain of uncertainty in a world devoid of hope and meaning. For Kirilov, action in such a world can only be a confirmation of its futility aligned with the fatal hope that the profound and absolute negation of negation, that his suicide makes manifest, will effect a change for mankind. Kirilov believes that his suicide will leave in its wake a transformed world, a world enlightened by the knowledge that there is no god. It is this kind of distorted “spirituality” or “hope” that for Dostoyevsky is the illusion of an empty soul.

The quote above sheds light on Kirilov’s logic of the unbounded self. He can only be certain of his being in the act of its annihilation. Kirilov says, “I am killing myself to show my defiance and my new terrible freedom.” Dostoyevsky, speaking of Stavrogin’s suicide, writes, “The verdict of our doctors after the post-mortem was that it was most definitely not a case of insanity.” Indeed, the logic of rigid introspection is not compatible with the idea of insanity as an irrational and degenerative condition. The logic that Dostoyevsky is concerned with here is the logic of modern man, whose obsession with knowledge of the self leads him to a confrontation with the abyss. It is the logic of a man who has sacrificed God on the altar of self-knowledge.

This kind of spiritual anguish is present throughout Dostoyevsky’s work. The battle waged in the hearts of many of Dostoyevsky’s characters is one between transcendental Christian love and the earthly world of the passions. The intellectual Ivan Karamazov attempts to use reason to explain the alogical mystery of God. Herein lay the conflict between passionate human reason and the mysterious beauty of God. The character of Dmitri Karamazov illustrates the destructive nature of earthly love, which is seated in the passions. It is in the character of Prince Myshkin, who attempts to live according to the ideals of Christian love, that one witnesses the destructive nature of the earthly passions. Indeed, all who come in contact with him believe him to be an “idiot.” Alyosha Karamazov demonstrates the ideal of a selfless Christian love in the midst of the violent passions. His mentor, Father Zossima, calls for a denial of the self in order to

achieve a transcendental union with a God based on Christian love:

Brothers be not afraid of men's sins. Love man even in his sin, for that already bears the semblance of divine love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light! Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. And once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly more and more every day. And you will at last come to love the whole world with an abiding, universal love.

For Dostoyevsky, a man such as Kirilov has no love for God's creation, for his fellow men but only for himself, and as such his world is drained of all meaning outside his own Self Will. He attempts to fill the void inside himself, which was left when God vanished from his world, but such excavations of the self ultimately leads him into a maze of shadows from which there is no exit except to enter the abyss.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Wittgenstein has offered a perceptive view of the self-world paradox and his own spiritual struggle with the notion of a god seems to indicate him as a kindred spirit in this discussion. Wittgenstein brings to light the paradox of solipsism when he writes, "the world is my world ... I am my world (The microcosm)." But "the subject does not belong to the world: rather it is a limit of the world." He goes on to write, "The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it."

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IV

ENCOUNTERS WITH  
TURKISH POETRY



## On *Rosestrikes* and *Coffee Grinds* by Seyhan Erözçelik

In Seyhan Erözçelik's *Coffee Grinds*, life is presented as unstable, as a continuum of experiences, part of "a long journey" within the arc of ascent and descent.<sup>1</sup> In the very first of the twenty-four readings of the fortune, the central themes of *Coffee Grinds* are suggested. There are people, "stretching toward the sky," "all together they are on a long journey, mixing with the smoke, and becoming an object." Here is the unification of subjective and objective experience, "one single object unified by smoke." Out of the multiplicity of phenomena there arises a single object. There are three roads all "opening towards the same place, the sky, emptiness. Pure, blessed, emptiness." Here is the destruction of the ego, the union with it. In the poem, God is never mentioned. It refers to the emptiness, a tabula rasa. But the arc of ascent and descent, this consummation, is simultaneous, there is no division between the micro- and macrocosm, indeed, "the sky turns human."

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<sup>1</sup> The Sufi concept of the arc of descent and ascent is the movement from the multiplicity of phenomena to the unity with divine essence and the reverse. This movement is not sequential but continuous, two aspects of this divine essence.

Fortune twenty tells of a “ferocious beast” (echo of the first canto in Dante?) who “drowns in a brook” and is “reborn in the cup” and continues to say, “to put it another way, it’s jumped a threshold. / To another world.” This is the “yearning” for a parallel space, for non-being, that “other world” where there is no interference from the ego. The woman is “amazed at everything or ready to be amazed, childlike / Not childlike, a child, a baby.” Regression to the origin. But, “distress, to continue the analogy, / is fed by the placenta, finding sustenance, gaining its existence from it.” Melancholy begins at birth. The original state of unity is broken. There is instead a multiplicity of phenomena and this is what causes suffering: “But now, with the rupture of the distress, the distress has increased.” “The fortune has dried”; there is a potential source of despair since, “the movements of time sometimes are much slower than the forward movement of our hopes.” This forward, linear perception of time is also a cause of suffering. One fails to experience the simultaneity of past, present and future during the arc of ascent/descent. It is a sobering experience rather than the dizzy, disoriented feeling of ecstasy that is at the heart of Sufism.

Then, in fortune fifteen, there is an image of affectionate display; she — at least it seems that the person receiving the reading is a woman — caresses a man’s head as it lies on her lap. But this causes a greater distress. It’s even worse than she could have imagined, and this is because, in another fortune, “you’re caught between two worlds,” the worlds of the spiritual and the material, “reborn,” “between sky and earth.” Yet the poet writes, “seen from another angle.” And this is how the fortune operates. It is a kind of seeing, of interpreting the world, subjectively. Fate is a fusion of being and looking at that being. Interestingly, in fortune twenty-two, the fortuneteller sees the woman being followed by saints and then corrects himself, “Nooo, fools!” In Tarot, the number associated with the Fool is zero, the number of unlimited potential, and the card is an indicator of the purity and open-hearted energy of the child. But zero also suggests unity before division, the pure, blessed, “emptiness” that is

the implicit goal of Sufi practice. He concludes, “the signs have disappeared now. *Beautiful!*” We are outside language itself for a moment — even the fortune is stalled. There is a brief interlude where perhaps that “blessed emptiness” is felt. But as life is unstable, anxiety does not end, but continues, albeit in another form, takes on the form of another beast. A wonderful aspect of the fortunes is how they speak of the “animal spirits that populate the universe ... the dome of the sky.”

In fortune twenty-three, the fortuneteller reveals the only way in which this can end: “the ending of anxieties depends on an arrival at the sky.” Therefore, the twenty-third fortune echoes the first fortune, where, “the mountain is flying to the sky ... leaving its main mass of land behind.” Indeed, *Coffee Grinds* is about a kind of vertical movement, the thrust is upward, through the destruction of the ego, and the absorption of multiplicity into unity, the zero that indicates the presence of the Fool. But these anxieties have their “roots on earth” and because of this, “they must cut off all ties with earth.” The final piece, written in English, suggests a kind of erotic relation between the fortuneteller and the woman.

The fortuneteller speaks about the validity of a fortune. He speaks of the importance of not writing down the fortune because then it becomes invalid, it “is to be read and interpreted only” (it is “a spirit echo of the world”) yet the “written word, sign is what matters.” It is what matters, but at the same time it is a prison from which he cannot escape, hence, while the poet is inspired by the woman, the mother, (one reveals oneself by looking at others, using the universe as a mirror), he cannot escape from despair. And this despair is associated with the act of writing and reading itself. Therefore, the poet says, “*Ikra / My desperation, Milady. With all my heart, Seyhan Erözçelik.*” The poet, like the fortuneteller, is at once the teller of the truth and a liar. Therefore, while the written word matters there is also a sense that what is hidden is just as important as what is revealed.

*Rosestrikes* is an altogether different kind of book than *Coffee Grinds*, but what makes them work together as a whole is how their similarities as well as their differences are woven together

so seamlessly. The fortunes in *Coffee Grinds* are indeed “moody” and changeable, and yet the overwhelming thrust of the poems is vertical, toward unification of the disparate elements of consciousness and the destruction of the ego in the arc of ascent/descent. On the other hand, *Rosestrikes* are a series of poems concerned with fragmentation, loss, despair and pain. The rose generally stands for the soul in Sufism. In alchemy, it is the red tincture that suggests a successful transformation. It is also solar and male, as opposed to the white rose that is female. In these poems, its function is also linguistic, and, in this way, the rose is almost divested of its traditional meanings and takes on a different character dependent on the word it is attached to. At one point the poet writes, “roses are multiplying / multiplying,” which suggests dispersion rather than unification, the central theme in these poems.

The very first poem, “Rosethroat” contains images of pain and loss. The narrator screams until his throat is hoarse, the suggestion being that he has failed to unify with the female, the pain he feels “has no relief,” a “thorn” pricks his heel. The scene is bloody and the “heartflesh dry like a rose.” And furthermore, “loves are burning. / Town is burning” and “A love is burning, / no water.” These images of war and holocaust and a desire that is not relieved contribute to the overwhelming sense that these poems will be about destruction, separation, an inability to destroy the ego and unify in love. In fact, these poems are in one sense about how the ego causes suffering.

The material fails to transform into the spiritual and thus the union is a failure; in “Cherryrose” the lover kisses so fervently that his lips become “cherryrose” like the beloved’s, but the poet writes “your lips, / still taste like lips.” And then the ironic, “Thanks!” Love has failed to transform the lover because they have not arisen to the spiritual state and remain bound by transitory images. In “Moonrose” he writes, “Here, / get hold of me. The poet speaks of the desperation of the lover, the desire to be reborn, “taken,” in both of its senses. There is the sickness of birth, of being, in a fallen world. And then there is the call to

the “invisible groom,” a desire to be ravaged: “Rape me. / With my invisible groom. // In your crime / bed.” There is something criminal about this union. It is a “rape” in a “crime bed.” This is the subversive element in Sufi sexuality. Spiritual union is conceived of as a transgressive and violent experience.

In “Rosebelief” the poet is heartsick and there is a rejection of belief in a higher spiritual plane but also a rejection of the premise of Coffee Grinds: “If you do not kiss what good / are roses? // Let them fade, / I’m no believer. // You can’t read a fortune / from its roses.” There is a sense of loss throughout these poems, for example, when the poet writes, “Passing myself / I pass out // The moon rises. / The rose has left with you” and that the heart is exiled. There are two aspects of the self at war with one another. The self fails to achieve a state of union with the other. Even the image of a bird in flight is described as a “flying prison.” In “Constellationrose” the poet is exiled from the sky, rooted to the earth, and unable to “fly,” to destroy the ego, and become unified in love. He writes, “Under / I’m silent.” This silence also implies wonder.

Even the “spiritual world” rejects and mocks the lover: “Angels laughed at me ... it seems the devil / made a pass ... The fire having fooled me, / hitting on me, / is fueling me.” This is the fallen world, the exile from paradise. As you write, “While desire is eternal and unobstructed, love is only possible from a state of fallen grace — a consciousness of loss.” And so we are spurred on by desire that arises from a sense of lack, of something missing, or amiss in the world and in ourselves: “The adoration lanced long ago / is still bleeding.”

But in “Spin o sa” there are lines that suggest the dizziness that is a prelude to ecstasy in Sufism: “the rose is spinning, / at the pit / c h / of the vertigo.” There is in this line the word “pit” as if the rose is spinning at the edge of it. But there is also the word “pitch,” which implies a sudden turn and also can suggest the black color that in alchemy refers to the initial chaos from which all the elements arose. Here is the whirling blackness of the initial chaos over which the “rose is spinning,” over which the poet is spinning. In a single image the ecstatic dizziness

of the spinning rose (poet) is fused with the whirling primal chaos. You write, “through the prism of multiplicity, disintegration and chaos to have a glimpse of the divine (Islamic or pagan) unity” is the essence of the Sufi experience. Earlier in the poem, a marten is on the “skyscraper / of the soul cleaning / its windows.” And at the end of the poem we read, “the clock stopping / now;” this is the moment where linear time is destroyed and past, present, and future are simultaneous. This “stopping” also implies death. Both meanings exist simultaneously. These are all moments, like in *Coffee Grinds*, where the poems seem to present an alternative experience that counters the overwhelming sense of loss and despair. But these experiences of union and dispersion do not necessarily occur independently and sometimes the experiences are simultaneous. For example, in “Revolverose” the poet writes “i collapse / in your arms.” The lines suggest union, the lover is exhausted. The title contains the word, “revolver” which suggests perhaps a kind of violence or death involved. Here perhaps is the death of the ego. Or perhaps this exhaustion can be a result of the dizzy ecstatic vertigo that a lover in Sufism experiences when he is rising to a higher spiritual plane.

And yet, “the elements dispersing too far ... too far ... far / rose is the mirage ... the mirage / in the dust.” Here is an ultimate realization that the rose itself, which in one sense stands for reality in these poems, is an illusion, a mirage. “The storm / has elapsed,” the veil is lifted and reality itself proves to be an illusion. And in “The Death of Gestures” comes acceptance: “Occasionally, we say this / to ourselves: / this is life, this is it, / we did this, / thus. / Where’re we now,” and “nothing can be the same as before.” This is the hard-won realization that pain has taught the poet. This life, here, even this body that I call my own, is temporary, and with this comes the realization of mortality: “Besides, / i see the skull in my face / in the mirror.” But despite death, “people need each other. / Why love together otherwise?”

Which leads naturally to a memory of childhood, the “*tabula rasa*” that Erözçelik refers to in his drawing. There is a realization that death is “a childhood disease.” And there is the trauma that he speaks of, that involves crushing the frost with the heel of his foot: “Because the inside of frost is hollow, the sound it makes being crushed is interesting.” So, the first pain is associated with a sound, a piece of music. And in the poem the poet asks, “Is that, in essence, Achilles’s scream?” Achilles screamed three times when he learned of the death of Patroclus, thus causing the Trojans to re-route their troops so he could retrieve the body. He ignores Thetis’s warning that if he avenges Patroclus’s death, he himself will die. So that primal “sound” has associated with it a fierce overwhelming love in the face of profound loss and the awareness that even what one loves is destined to fade away, or die. Furthermore, the poet writes, “Fragments of frost broke the weave / in the heart, cut it / loose ... only the cut endures.” There is a break in the continuum, a rift in the eternal, and we are time-bound, painfully aware of our own mortality in this fallen world. And this, despite our almost hysterical desire to love: “I want to put my hook into your heart so that you can’t unhook me.” In *Rosestrikes*, this signals the change from innocence to experience, which is a kind of death. And from this first death desire is born.

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## Fragmentary Improvisations of Yearning Küçük İskender's "souljam"

*wounded electricity complements the body* NOT Whitman's Body-Electric but the fragmented body (Artaud's "body without organs") and there is also perhaps the suggestion of electroshock, the shockwaves of an explosive subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> *chime-*

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1 The following text is based on a reading of Küçük İskender's "souljam," in Murat's translation, included in *Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry* published by Talisman House Publishers in 2004. K. İskender (1964-) belongs to the group of Turkish poets, that if alive in their fifties, would also include Lale Müldür, Ahmet Güntan, Seyhan Erözçelik, Sami Baydar, and Haydar Ergülen. This poetry is a reaction to the changes in Istanbul's population and the city's central political and cultural position in the world after the fall of the Soviet Union. Istanbul had become a "nexus of movement, a sprawling, global metropolis." It was no longer a city of one million people, of secrets and mysterious depths. In "souljam," İskender tears apart the official facade of Turkish culture with "a big bang from the center of the soul." His language includes references to pop culture, the sciences, and crime reports, but there are also lyrical outbursts and archaic language. This complex hybrid reflected the new Istanbul of exponential growth and development. İskender created "souljam" from the contents of twenty notebooks, journals he kept from February 19, 1984 to December 26, 1993. The poem reverses the order of the notebooks; the lowest numbered fragment corresponds to the latest notebook. This is İskender's attempt "to suppress the chronological confusion, to push it to the very beginning, to a faetal sensibility."

*ras ghost whispering* Artaud's vile spirits that inhabit the body as it exits the womb *boy pulled into the four winds a cock in his mouth* Body raped, abused, the brutality of life BUT (the poet) the bandit grows The poet will learn to curse, blaspheme (*the dream in which I saw my grandma / burn her koran, I interpret it as / my sexual freedom*), tear the sentences apart with his teeth, he is an enraged animal, sexually charged (*I carry a zoo in me*) 1) *virus: valid declared* — *validates the main stream* the criterion of language, all that is correct, the domination of truth, everything used to suppress the mind. What is valid is accepted, what is not is thrown into the garbage dump. And there are these *geriatric gas positions itself in a suitable lung* these stations in society are old, withered, of no use any longer. İskender rejects "the tradition" the suitable lung the right word; it is an attack on the sterility of language that maintains the tradition, this *consensus in the aesthetic field* and the owner of *the building* owns the words (Spicer's "there are bosses in poetry"). 2) the mystery: the weeping. Mother earth, mother Istanbul, infected, *shoots up* and *metal is happy* industry, politics, institutionalism, the whole industrial revolution is shit and bomb happy (*infiltration of communication by mechanical insulation*) and *condom is an insult* tries to restrict pleasure to hold the sperm hostage and then *night begins the rhesus monkey having turned human on an impulse* (here is his origin story; and the brain's awesome harmony is a *giant tumor / of knee jerk reactions* a primal fire that is

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In my text, I allude to İskender's radical view of Sufism. In Sufism, the ego must break down in order for the soul to begin its ascent toward God. According to İskender, the physical body breaks down in a kind of orgasmic rapture, but the ego does not die. It becomes divine. I also refer to the Sufi concept of the arc of descent and ascent, which is the movement from the multiplicity of phenomena to the unity of God and the reverse. This movement is not sequential but continuous, two aspects of the same divine essence. In souljam this multiplicity is expressed in the form of fragments, imploding, exploding and transforming themselves in relation to another, yearning for unity with God through the body. My "essay" is an improvisation on the text, a record of my encounter with the fragmentary and volatile quality of souljam, rather than a conventional essay. The quotes from "souljam" are in italics. (P.V.)

*cross-examined by a bureaucracy* (Burroughs's "thought police") but instead, *violence, at bottom / is a crack of yearning* But *the great white crosses and joins the captains log*, the threat, the abyss represented by Melville's great white is domesticated, becomes part of language, conscripted for its use, becomes a tv commercial, part of the main stream, so *the seagull panics* does not want its sound reduced to a grammatical rule, eats up the *weak worm of ionized penance* here is an attack on Christian guilt, no need to confess anything. *reconnection prowls around defensive techniques contra slow time* (the organization of the journal entries defies a logical order, defies linear time. The "speed" of the poem is 100 miles/hr in a 20 mile zone) *your face the desert shower of necessary love* (In the phrase, "desert shower" contraries fuse, the dry desert gushes water) *subject to rough trade* (both rough trade agreements and rough sex), *to deposits of excess dnas / long held in the mirage air* Even the air is fake, and the Dynamic Authentication System retrieves information about user's hardware and software for authentication purposes. And your love is being recorded. *Fatal/Foetal* (the ultimate fatality is death (fast forward) but foetal suggests birth/origin, a reversal. Oblivion in both directions *the path of my angels will track / through the blind / alley* So we have here the continuum ("no tangible instant"). No difference between future or past. The poem races forward as fast as it races backward and at the same time, a *railroad of sound* and *i a bit too out of line* suggests any possible union is cut off, fragmented like the sentence, like the lines of these pseudo poems, a fragmented body yearning for unity. *crowds are inclinations of the like* here is mainstream, the tv sensibility, streamlined behaviors, the mob rules. *my bequeathal / to the future as a strain of light a viral strain of light*. Iskender is a *scientist in god forsaken solitude in the genesis of light / awaiting the lure of transparent insanity he is anteing up my concentration*. Iskender's ego is in overdrive, he will beat God at his own game by determining the hour of his death rather than leaving it to accident or natural causes (*my suicide is provided for*) *my mind / sores (soars) on a skin / white as cream // by cock's / havoc / violated / in a hammock // Dream / and mid scream / and mid*

*scream* His bruise from being violated sexually is sublimated and becomes his means of flight. (Murat Nemet-Nejat writes, “that violence (in spirituality and love) is the heart of Sufi sensibility and violence is sublimated as a cosmic principle.) This sore is also the viral strain of light. *in solitude, me, full of hard ons ons ons* here he arrives at the continuum through a physical sensation, in solitude. Here is an Artaudian resonance *that someone’s trying to kill me / is inlaying my mind, as if we’d / swapped secrets / making a night of it many, many nights / of drowse and bruise* (again the sore and the dream, rough sex and sleep) *how many whispered words mopped up by my fingers wandering on your lips, words I couldn’t catch* words are cut off, inarticulate. The attempt to feel the other falls short. The subjectivity in İskender is extreme, contact with the world and the other is rejected. But this explosive subjectivity will be at the center of a radical Sufi practice where İskender yearns for *the infinite contours of his consciousness. a kid defines night / as an etude of comprehending life / with his tiny cock, // like color blindness in smell blindness / experiencing carnation as a rose, / and me, experiencing carnation in a rose.* The young boy’s experience of his own sexuality allows him to see day and night as one. Rather than the blind leading the blind with “accurate” and “valid” interpretations (translations) of, say the word, “carnation,” which is interpreted as a rose, İskender purposely misreads the meaning of the word, (*me, experiencing carnation in a rose*) and perhaps recalls that the meaning of the word “carnation,” is derived from a misreading of the Arabic “Karnful,” i.e. “clove as pink clove.” This is an act of creative translation and an attempt to go past the official meanings of words and perceptions that sustain the status quo (*i a bit too out of line*) But there is this *sadness above me, / when will it stop brooding? the serenity and inner peace of not learning / one single prayer which I can recite by heart / dying* God is out of the picture. İskender will control when he dies. His process is one of unlearning all the knowledge handed down to him and he will search out a love considered, *reprehensible by the planet earth by scanning the irradiation*

of my puckered fire and reading the shredded documents / of a long forgotten cult (this is his “Shamanistic, intuitive synthesis”). And furthermore he writes, *useless! / god is useless. / i'm god* This heresy is also part of İskender's Godless Sufism. It is the love, of a not yet visible asia, is / the barely sensible skin of plants His love of what is not visible is like the *barely sensible skin of plants* The invisible is felt. Here once again is the fascinating quality of these poems where a spiritual perception is arrived at by the physical. İskender's *identity is the befouling of what is / knowable, and the downward velocity / of becoming young* He is atavistic, regressive, descending into the core of the earth and back towards the origin, where he is young again. He has achieved a childlike innocence that is Blakean. (*in our room of toys, / dreams are shaking off / anxiously their dust*) İskender writes that *linear logic is the use of perception's least / common denominator* When he writes, *the vitality of / science and discovery illuminated / in pure orgasm / only* he seems very close to the Rimbaud of the *Illuminations*. He wants to *negate the deviation / inherent in the deficiencies and deflations of choosing among / food or lovers* the limitation of choice. He rejects convention, says “no both.” He speaks of the *pure orgasm* that is the extreme pleasure point (spiritual) of his radical subjectivity. The instability of knowledge and knowing, *the difference between knowing that what is merely visible is woven / into what is longed for, and spelling out / that what is merely accepted is in conflict with what is rumored / about. over extending, / over exploring of myself. away from faith but very near / dissolution, a sentence, whose subject / is neurosis, whose sentence is dying, whose teleology, / mist* Here is the Godless form of Sufism, the rejection of faith *but very near dissolution* Here is İskender's radical subjectivity in which the breakdown occurs, a destruction not of the ego but of the world in seeking a primal unity. The structure of the sentence is breaking apart. Attempts to explain phenomena fail because they are as vague and inconsequential as the *mist*. Then there is the *reality sandwich* or Burroughs's *naked lunch on the end of a spoon*, reality check: *charred bodies* in between the sheets, in a *grimy* all night hotel, inhaling the smoke from a

crack joint (ecstatic drug use, expansion of consciousness, his *blur of moans*) *i'm it* The ego does not break down. He is the world. But İskender writes *my soul the bribe given my body* This reminds me of Artaud, the soul as something immaterial that invades the body and constantly instills in it a sense of lack. The body against its will becomes indebted to the soul. And it is this very immaterial quality, this “misty” quality that makes it so hard to attack directly and requires nothing less than the destruction of the World. Life is another form of immaterial invasion that does not care for humans and continues on irrespective of human achievement (this is Bronk’s territory). But İskender writes *life probed me. my heart lets go. “gotch ya!” my heart won’t notice* He will ignore Life. Here is İskender’s radical subjectivity again. He rejects any talk of Being and the World. Rather, *death is the ultimate mother fucker i cherish vamping poems* Nothing is original, there are no masterpieces — the ultimate and only challenge for the poet is Death. İskender wouldn’t have it any other way. *the divine body like a broken sculpture and violence is the foreign tongue of the body* This also reminds me of Artaud. İskender is doing violence to his text, rearranging the initial order of his journals, breaking syntax, creating an undercurrent of destruction, the fragmented body/text is a roar, an almost hysterical rejection of everything that constitutes society, and his is a radical ego whose *fragmentary improvisations of yearning* are his ladder up down the arc. There is also the radical melancholy of Sufism: *spring wrote me no letters of utopias, winter did* İskender is against nature, growth, the lure of Spring, and instead finds his own subjective vision of utopia in the cold, winter season, the season of snows, of death *death is the ultimate mother fucker* But his “suicide” is provided for. He is without a womb, self-generated, ego driven, a “body without organs.” The body is not his own. It’s for rent. *You don’t sell your body, only rent it and at what price? And since a body / without a soul / is called a corpse, no difference between entering any old whore house & fuck someone there & fucking any old corpse ... obsessions of necrophilia both* But then he writes, *except for my*

*own life, except for my own life*, i.e., the ego still lives triumphs over death.

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## The Eda of Ece Ayhan's *Orthodoxies*

Iccius, I can see you love<sup>1</sup>  
 this sweet-scented boy of the Arabian palace.  
 You are seduced by these jewels and rare gems  
 that are strewn about his bedroom and that hang from his  
     thin neck,  
 and his exquisite scent and his deep red lips,  
 and his blue radiant eyes, but beware  
 the gods say you will meet your death at his hands.

Istanbul, the city of unspeakable beauty; the city of stench,  
 crooked streets, endless vice.

*A portrait: His only side — his face — to be talked about: the space  
 between his legs. And he has grown a mustache and a beard. An  
 inveterate. A pervert. Such talk about him. He doesn't go near*

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1 The italicized sections are from Murat Nemet-Nejat's translation of Ece Ayhan's *The Blind Cat Black* and *Orthodoxies*, published by Sun & Moon Press in 1997. This essay is a collage from various literary sources, including excerpts from Ece Ayhan's *Orthodoxies* and my own work that explore the concept of a transgressive sexuality, that in Ayhan's poetry is equated with the divine essence. Murat Nemet-Nejat has written about this concept of Eda, in Turkish poetry: "What is ecstatic in eda involves a blurring of identities, in pain, at the same time moving from object to object, unifying them in a mental movement of yearning, dance of dispossession."

*women as he should. He whets suspicion. An erect plume on his head. A barber's piece. A pornographic masterpiece. He is buried alive in the ground. Head first. Ouch! A few sailboats, startled, shine at a distance.*

*Why couldn't I understand?*

I got laid, I punished myself, I was looking to die. At twenty-five I was HIV positive. Good. I was a dead man. The disappearance of shame is very recent. A few weeks in fact. With the books and the rest, I imagine, it's gone. Moreover, I didn't know that I was so ashamed. Yet I knew that I had been trying to get infected. I didn't know that I was so ashamed. Ashamed of being hairy, ashamed of being homosexual, ashamed of being Jewish, ashamed of using drugs, in the order of what was most visible to what I was trying to hide. Monkey, rat, vermin, sub-human. It's crazy. Do I need to explain the first sentence of this text? He carried me. He was telling his story. He was not ashamed. He loved hair. He bore the same name as a classic author. He was published by a chic publisher who gave him money to wander around. I jerked off repeatedly to *Le Journal d'un voyage en France*. I only just read *Tricks* this year ... Until then I was afraid. I could not read a book that only talked about sex between men. I'm not kidding. It's the truth.

*Modesty, a mood ... Now, a leftover. Know. The bend in a child's heart. His crafty, elegant wrist ... He has writings etched over his breast in saffron repeating, embroidering one word from the lexicon endlessly: hermaphrodite. A hermetic woman. A thief woman. A thief of she.*

Istanbul, the long-coveted prize of the Islamic Ottoman Empire, the vulnerable, beloved, cherished spiritual center of Eastern Christianity.

Orthodoxies means “virtuous, pious,” but in slang it means “homosexual, pederast.” The life of the body is conflated with the spiritual. Moreover, transgressive sexuality is equated with the divine essence. It is a heresy that the Catholic Church has covered with layer after layer of dualistic thinking: the flesh must suffer in order to gain entrance into heaven, must reject the earth, the pleasures of the body, in order to inhabit the spiritual.

Istanbul, the site of the rational, tent-like simplicity of Turkish Imperial architecture; the awesome interior space of Hagia Sofia; the European and Asian city.

So, in the end it was warlike folk, Alexander and his Little Dwarves, the Successors, who carried out the dissemination of Greek education that Isocrates had foretold. War became a handmaiden of philosophy. To be teachers of the world, you had first to make the world come to school. And that meant war was also a matter of language. In a sense, Alexander's mission was simply to force everyone to learn Greek, though all local languages would supposedly be honored too. And for this purpose, a simplified and easy-to-learn dialect was manufactured. That's what I grew up with, as my more or less first language, learned from my parents in Gadara, alongside the Syrian that I learned from the servants who, though my skin was the same dusky hue as theirs, always seemed exotic to me.

*He loves easily, passes his hand below the belt of my vault, forgets easily what a secret Jew I am.*

Outside a leather nightclub, men are talking, laughing. It's drizzling, early morning, crack of dawn. They're soaked in sweat, exhausted, but wired at the time.

**There were no little words of loving him, these keys on his belt (warden, lover!) couldn't be little cooing words of loving him. I ran away, scared, not to meet the porcelain doll. To meet him. That would be my going back to the Lexicon of Torture.**

The people in Ece Ayhan series of poems, *Orthodoxies*, inhabit a shadow world, they are outsiders, transvestites, boy and girl prostitutes, tattooed punks, heroin merchants, the unnamed, performing unspeakable acts, transmitting code-words among themselves to voice desires which cannot be absorbed by the dominant culture. They are heretical. But they delight in heresy, in the music of lust.

In the poems, a proper name signals a presence whose contours remain vague, as if partly obscured in darkness, defined by a gesture, their clothing, a startling detail. It is as if the poems illuminate the actors in the process of acting, but only for a moment, since what occurs is unspeakable, or rather, there is no language for it in the dominant lexicon. But homosexuality has always had an unusual relation to the dominant culture in Turkey. In *Orthodoxy 4*, Ayhan speaks of Kose Kahya, *the comic hero of operettas*, whose gay mannerisms were not explicitly named as gay as long as he was seen as an actor in theatrical productions, where excessive “gay” behavior is often the norm. But the way in which the visible and the invisible interact, often in equal measure, informs Ayhan’s poetics. A certain detail, a fragment, is able to inhabit and express simultaneously the visible and the invisible, able to articulate as much as it hides.

*Imagine a person one meets in a tavern starts telling us about his entire life. This narrative leaves zero impression. But the same person’s allusion in a phrase to his life, maybe a detail he invents, displaces the narrative he is telling us at length. Instead of obeying stupidly the world order, the order of words is jolted by the finger of the imagination from its set arrangement and left in this new place.*

Some of the figures in Ayhan’s poems:

*She used to flog her girls, a madam, in a half-assed way. It is sacred and untouched with cum the guild of the red light district. (Orthodoxies 11)*

*Finduktar, constantly searching for his daughters. He was famous for his disrespect for his ancestors; but is punished. (Orthodoxies 12)*

*His chained arms brush his kept mistress. What a randy dandy monster! He etches out with a gimlet. He has laid paint on his face as best he could. (Orthodoxies 13)*

*A Levantine ... A deacon, still thinking of the boy he couldn't forget, will stoke out an engraved figure out of the ashes. Poems will lead him by the hand. (Orthodoxies 23)*

*He is combing his hair in cum water. Then treated to flowers. A garland of braids. From time to time blinking, with vast hanging earrings. (Orthodoxies 30)*

*"I'm the king," a spoiled child was shouting ... with his little and boastless cock*

The market is crowded with men and women of all ages, and animals, the stink of sweat and feces is overwhelming, bright sun beating down, a man steps forth, offers his bid, the whore shrugs his shoulders, laughs, "what you want with little gold, think you can kiss me? Hahaha! Stupid American, go home buy cheap American whore." The crowd erupts into laughter, he, the buyer, is humiliated, turns to the whore and spits on the sand, cursing the boy, then turns and disappears into the dusty afternoon, the whore smiles, unafraid, saunters toward a young man, leans down, smiling, exposing a single gold tooth, reflecting the sun's rays, and kisses his red cheek. *He will play the king at Gomorrah*

The poems in *Orthodoxies* are suggestive; they flash across the readers eyes like images in a film, like discontinuous fragments of an event, a place, or a person. But the transition from one line to another does not create a linear narrative. The thrust is toward a verticality. In other words, **the less intrusive the photographer the better**. Ayhan writes, “time is whipped to shreds.” “Whipped” is certainly suggestive of BDSM practice, but more importantly the word is a clue about the essential nature of these poems. They exist in an alternate space not governed by linear time or daylight. The day belongs to people who can cope with everyday life but the night is for those who want to distance themselves from the light, and exist in a world of fantasy, and imagination, and art. They are chthonic: *I took shelter in a coffin*. Their arena is an underworld where the detritus of society can act out their desires. But the poems are not without their sense of camp and playfulness. Take this description of a dancing boy in *Orthodoxies* 3:

*Let them whistle the warped tune. His soapy earrings, a lewd bathroom ditty.*

In *Orthodoxies* 16, the poet plays on the word “straight” when speaking of Father Hamparsum, the first inventor of musical notations among the Ottomans. He writes, “*Due to his true faith, his notes go straight.*” Ayhan continues, “*Believing like an Orthodox, Armenian, he sang like an Ottoman. Hey!*”

Galata, a district of crooked, winding streets, where Turkish minorities, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, reside among seedy bars, warehouses, transvestites on the street corners of Istanbul.

Prostitutes on street corners, smoking, eyeing a target, a young man with shorts and dark shades, leaning against a wall, *he is spreading the lilies of jealousy on the ground*, cars slowing down across the street where there is rough trade waiting to be picked

up. A heroin dealer crosses the street, the traffic light turns from green to red. A transvestite lights a cigarette, coughs, fixes his mini-skirt, saunters up to a big muscular guy in leather and chaps, strikes up a conversation. *She could outsmart a fox, loaded with experience.* A teenager, heavily made up with lipstick and black eyeliner, walks arm and arm with an older man. A poet, they say. *The scarlet priest is turning the pages of the sultan's private book woven with naked black slaves.*

Even if you feel shy and confused,

This dark room is a paradise for your senses

My dear boy. No, not those absurd places

Where they dance among the false glittering lights.

Here, your virgin lust can freely sing.

He carries this poem in his pocket as a magical charm. *There they spin children at a bottle game.* Then mount them at full tilt. He believes it will draw the boys out from the shadows. *He invents plots, a prince kept in the house. His armor has grown weak, delicate. His seal is of rusting iron, but his chest a flag of insurrection.*

*Gradually the speech of the red bird is like a scream*

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## On Ahmet Guntan's *Romeo and Romeo*

In the introduction to *Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry* published by Talisman House, Murat Nemet-Nejat writes, "What is ecstatic in eda involves a blurring of identities, in pain, at the same time moving from object to object, unifying them in a mental movement of yearning, dance of dispossession." In this context, what struck me about Ahmet Guntan's *Romeo and Romeo* is exactly this blurring of identities between the lover and the beloved. Romeo gazes into Romeo's eyes: Narcissus gazing into a pool. The poem begins with an image of seeing, "Seeing me he came from you." Narcissus loses himself as he reaches for his own image: "More than me you, I'll remember, I / sleep in you." So this is the Sufi destruction of the ego, the blurring of identities enacted in the poems. Not Buber's "I / Thou" but the blurring of distinctions between the I and the you. Furthermore, the speaker, the I, is alone like Narcissus, "I'm with myself, alone, for myself, / walking around, me, taking you out / who, u-turning, takes within you, me." This Other arises from the speaker himself as much as it can be seen as someone "outside" of himself. But this is a moment among many moments in the sequence of poems where this kind of Cartesian rationality breaks down utterly, the distance between lover and beloved is blurred, one flows into the other. Finally, I'm not certain it is accurate to say that the speaker is addressing another person in the material sense. At first it seemed to me

that two people were meant, but then I realized that, instead, they are in a process of unification on a spiritual plane, where individual ego is subsumed in ecstasy. What I mean is that there is a lover addressing his beloved in the poem but the distinction between the two doesn't hold because the ego is not there. It is as if Narcissus having drowned emerged on the other side of life somewhat like Orpheus in the famous scene in Cocteau's film. Indeed, the speaker is a kind of Orpheus figure — "in sleep you depart, from me, / in sleep I forget, I, I / depart, from you." And in another poem, "You are leaving, don't, stay here I said, he said / I don't go far he said, he says. / am not leaving, I'm staying, I said." The desire of union and the pain of departing in this poem is so heightened that the reader feels this "dialogue" can only be occurring on a spiritual plane. A reader feels the "mental movement of yearning, the dance of dispossession."

And the poems end with a consummation of this love on a higher plane, but this is not final. The following lines at the end of the poems show a kind of reversal of linear time: "what runs away, follows" and "what doesn't stop stop." Time is not measured the same way when the lovers' identities are merged. Perception has changed, "I want to start from scratch." But each of these phrases are preceded by the phrase "Once more, once more, once more." So it is not as though the time is static. Here is the "weaving of past and present into one continuum, which is the Sufi essence of time. In this perception the splits between past, present and even future disappear into a simultaneity — into movements of perception." In this space of consummation time is not split into past, present, and future. Just as the idea of linear time interrupts the perception of a continuum, so does the ego create a distance between the I and the other.

One last thought on Guntan's poems. Murat Nemet-Nejat, in his essay on *Romeo and Romeo*, mentions that "the sleep and wake-up times of the two appear out of sync with each other, one waking up exactly when the other is going to sleep." Sleep is also when the body is at rest. It is in a state of non-being, egoless,

and not subject to rational thought. For these reasons, it is most receptive to the penetration of the other in a spiritual sense. The waking relation to the dream state confirms that there is an alternate mode of experience, one that is perhaps more real in a sense than what we see when we are awake. I would like to close with my translation of a section from Philostratus the Elder's *Images*, which I thought would be interesting in the context of this poem. In it Philostratus is describing a painting of Narcissus to a boy:

Now I want you to notice certain tiny details that give the painting a greater sense of realism; look, for example, at the painted dewdrops that drip from the flowers and look at that bee settling on a flower — now you might ask yourself whether a real bee has been deceived by a painted flower and yet, on the other hand, perhaps we are the ones who are deceived and a painted bee is in fact real. I do not know the answer. Let us leave this question for now. Rather, let us resume our discussion of Narcissus. Now the painting hasn't deceived you, Narcissus, nor do you occupy yourself with a thing made of pigments or wax. But you don't realize that this is just your reflection in the pool as you gaze into it; instead you are tricked by the resemblance of your image in the water. Now if you changed the expression on your face or made a gesture with your hands you would see that the image changes. Instead, what do you expect to happen? You act as though you had met a friend, and you wait for him to do something. Do you expect the very pool to somehow enter in conversation with you? Of course, you don't. And this young man before us cannot hear anything we say, he is too preoccupied with gazing into the pool, and so we must discover the meaning of the painting ourselves.

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## Cultural Residue and Melancholy in the Poetry of İlhan Berk

In İlhan Berk's poetry,<sup>1</sup> objects often appear in the foreground, and the poet speaks of their historical residue, the ways in which they appear changed in a new historical setting and resonate with different meanings, often in conflict with each other, as a result of the changing face of Istanbul in a globalized economy. Of course, language is one such object in the world that changes. There were changes in Turkish poetry with the Second New<sup>2</sup> in the fifties and sixties, the poetry of movement and also to changes in the sonic landscape, the sounds in the street, of people talking mingled with the noise of reconstruction or worse, an ominous silence; indeed, the sensual landscape, the world of objects, also changes. As a result, an air of melancholy pervades the city of Istanbul and these poems. But as I will show there is Berk's humor which reflects a wisdom about the nature of life.

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1 The poems discussed in this essay were translated by Murat Nemet-Nejat, except for "Garden" translated by Önder Otçu. All the poems are included in *Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry* published by Talisman House in 2004.

2 The Second New is a central poetic movement in Turkish poetry which began in the mid-1950s with Cemal Süreya's *Pigeon English* and Ece Ayhan's *Miss Kinar's Waters* and whose main energy as a movement continued until the publication of Ece Ayhan's *Orthodoxies* in 1968.

Berk is, above all, a sensual poet, implicitly expressing that strain of animism so unique to Turkish poetry, which derives from Sufism. Take his description of garlic in a poem titled "Garlic," "From outside it is like covered bazaars, musk shops selling heavy, pungent perfumes; looks like pitchers which let no water ooze; a sleepy church, its windows and doors shut." Remember, he is speaking of a sheaf of garlic. This simple, everyday vegetable is pregnant with multiple meanings, as the mind of the poet moves quickly from perception to perception, a world with pungent smells and a unique sonic landscape, the land of endless vice, now in the grips of an ecstasy of multiplicity. Berk writes, "If I hold it and pry loose its dry, dumb head with a few bites, stripping its first layer, then its second, then third, then its very thing, transparent membrane ... it will suddenly [turn] into a monster. The garlic responds: I ONLY EXIST BY MY SMELL!" The "monster" is the pungent smell of the garlic after the outer layers are stripped! It is also insubstantial, a mist that appears and recedes into invisibility, refusing categorization, and appropriation. Given Turkey's history, as a country reshaped again and gain by foreign entities, Berk can write of this garlic that it can now pass to, "the mouths of Gascony children and Fatih's, Sultan Beyazit the Second's, Abdulhamit's and my kitchens, and reassuming all its shy, dignified demeanor, land itself this way before me. Notice the references to the East and the West in the poem. This is an essential aspect of Turkish culture, the simultaneous experience of different cultural and historical resonances, in objects as simple as a sheaf of garlic, which even Homer, "the expert on the aroma of meats," celebrated. Also, the ladies of the court in the time of Henry IV used the smell to identify the king in order to run away from his sexual advances!

The experience that Berk is talking about is one that does not resemble the European experience of history or language and this is because of the unique strain of animism directly connected to a Sufi experience of the world. Some critics have invoked French surrealism, and more particularly, a poet like

Francis Ponge, in speaking of Birk's poetry. I think this is inaccurate. This merging of consciousness and object, or expansion of consciousness does not occur in European poetry except during visionary states, say in Rimbaud, whom Birk has translated, or highly imaginative states induced by drugs, say in Michaux, or in extreme states as in Artaud. I think Michaux's experience of the apple is typical of French subjectivity. To "enter" the apple, that is, where the self experiences the objectness of the object directly, is painful and so remains an intellectual fantasy.

In a poem called "House" in *The Book of Things*, Berk writes,

Our subject, you gather, is house.

So we're going to wander around in the world of things (by world we mean no more than "the world of things"). And this world we know too. It is therefore enough for us to open a dictionary (dictionaries are the embryos of life) and to list the things we see. Everything there is arranged and neatly set out with great care.

(Isn't everything scripted anyway?)

In Berk's "Garden," we see the same process of a mind moving around the garden and into the house, changing perception as it moves: "I SEE THE HOUSE AFTER I LEAVE THE GARDEN BEHIND." In this poem, the subject is a house and a garden and their relationship to one another. The garden is a specific locus in Turkish poetry, along with the house, rooms, stairs, and so on. Berk moves blithely through the poem, speaking of the "verticality" of the house and of the garden, which does not "know the house." Then Berk is ironic, "How Beautiful!" He continues, "What's more, the world of objects is like this. / They all gather to enjoy the unknown." Like men and women seeking each other! The garden is female, "full of sound and voices. Its face overflowing into the street. Offering a female reading," but "the house has a conservative quality" and is "permeated with that despotism which wounded it long ago." And yet "they" need each other, complement each other, are two aspects of the same continuum. In Sufism, things are sentient, animated, and in this

poem, Berk delightfully personifies the house and the garden, offering a “sexual reading.” He writes, “To compare them, it is sexual (what is not?)” And the last three playful lines show Berk at is most sensual,

Oh garden, the muddy singer of the street.  
 “Dirty Child.”  
 Hello gardens, here I am!

In these lines, the “garden” is the “dirty child” that the house welcomes, “here I am!” This charming quality in Berk’s poem, his carefree manner, is connected with the sensuality of Sufism and an ecstatic feeling. Berk exhibits a profound understanding of the dynamic between the house and the garden and that they are not separate from each other, but complementary. In Sufism there is no separation, duality dissolves in the continuum.

I would now like to examine Birk’s poem, “The Denizens of the Arcade Hristaki,” which crucially condenses the experiences of the Turkish women, mostly ethnic minorities who worked in whorehouses. Only their voices remain as echoes the poet evokes. Critics have spoken of the influence of Freud on Birk’s poetry, but I think what is more important than any assumption of the value of a Freudian reading of his work is the fact that the neurosis and anxiety that the men and women in this poem experience is a result of Western influence and dominance. In the opening line, an Armenian woman named Diran says, “I don’t love evenings anymore ... once I used to love evenings so much.” The line suggests that she is feeling old and saddened about the passing of time. I read this next line as a response to Diran, “Everything has changed, everything left its place to a silence.” This is not the silence of wonder but an ominous silence. A woman speaking of another says, “She always wears high heeled shoes, she always goes out alone.” No john is interested in an aging prostitute. Diran continues, “Memories made me fat ... I don’t want to touch anything any more.” To remember is now a burden on the body, only reminds one of

the passage of time. Eleni says, "I am burning all over for quite a while, I am trembling ... the doctor saying I've got nothing," and "I should go to bed early, get up early, be careful not to catch cold, I should take care of my health." As one ages, there is fear of disease and a kind of paranoid relation can develop between the patient and doctor when the patient insists they are feeling sick, and the doctor tries to convince them that they don't need to worry. Another woman writes, "Looking out of the window is enough for me. There, Eleni is returning with her new blue bag." What is of interest is this new blue bag. About another woman, Sara, someone says, "Once she didn't give a damn about the world, she wore yellow socks and went to bed with whoever she pleased." This freedom harkens back to the old Istanbul, with its body of secrets and endless vice. But now there is insomnia, one is afraid of growing old; these women no longer seek out pleasures through sexual adventures: "And now, at four o'clock, I am tossing in my bed, keep tossing in it." And what is behind this sad but poetic image, "Her silk stockings, especially her long legs, and her sleeping with a rose in her mouth the whole night." What memory of lost love is she subconsciously lamenting? The self now turned inward without release yields to a sense that "This world is strangling me, this house, this window, these curtains, this toothbrush." In this poem, Birk is speaking of a kind of mutation of consciousness as a result of European dominance and infection. The past is receding into oblivion to make way for the new world, "this city, these bells, these sounds from the radio are driving me crazy," writes a woman in the poem.

Turkey, over the centuries has been shaped and reshaped by foreign influences, which it has assimilated. But as Murat Nemet-Nejat points out in his essay, "Istanbul Noir," this is not to be understood as a "melting pot." This is what gives Birk's poetry its unique character and why the various, often conflicting, historical resonances at work in his poetry, give rise to paradoxical emotions. This is why cultural and historical residue is so important, reflecting as it does such a myriad of past influences, existing simultaneously in a single object as mundane as a sheaf of garlic. As a result of Sufism, the consciousness of these re-

flections of past history is kaleidoscopic. Objects are indeed in communication, speaking with each other and with man over a wider spectrum of consciousness than was ever possible to experience in the Western Intellectual tradition. Objects in Sufism are sentient, and the Sufi experience of the world is as a continuum, where there is no separation between the subjective and objective experience of the world. Finally, the overwhelming sense one gets, in these poems by İlhan Berk, is of a melancholy deeper than anyone can express, except perhaps in poetry but also a humor that expresses a profound understanding of life.

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REVIEWS OF SOME  
JAZZ AND FREE  
IMPROVISATION RECORDS



## The Schlippenbach Trio's *Pakistani Pomade*

The Schlippenbach Trio has been performing free jazz for over two decades. During this time, they built up an impressive series of recordings that establish them as one of the greatest trios to emerge from the free-jazz scene in Europe in the seventies. The trio is Alexander von Schlippenbach, piano, Evan Parker, tenor and soprano sax, Paul Lovens, drums and percussion. One of their best recordings is called, *Pakistani Pomade*. It was released on CD in 2003. It was the release of this CD that occasioned the following notes on the trio. They were written almost entirely while listening to that album.

Notes on the Schlippenbach Trio:

1. Fixtures are not immediately visible but still hold up the large structure. Sense of coherence at the extreme borders of improvisation. Even here there is that utter clarity of Schlippenbach's atonal lines. A concentrated force.
2. Evan Parker's sheer invention, structurally and tonally. He can make the tenor and soprano sound in completely original ways. On tenor, the sounds are split into sonic units, re-forged. A kaleidoscopic emission. He does not merely cut up or juxtapose. His is a transformational alchemy. He is fiercely

abstract. But this abstraction creates new forms where an intensity of feeling emerges. On soprano, that most unwieldy of instruments, he creates a valuable new language. The sounds whirl, wend, weave, incredibly high up on the registers at times. A sonic piercing, snakelike. A thin needle of light, many-colored. Using the technique of multiphonics — the simultaneous sounding of several notes on an instrument normally considered capable of producing only one sound at a time — he improvises long, continuous lines that build to an almost trance-like intensity. The winged serpent is invoked.

3. Paul Lovens's drumming creates constantly shifting infinitesimal centers. He complements Parker and Schlippenbach masterfully. He can play softly or very loud without straining or losing the line of the trio. An astonishing variety of interesting sounds are generated as he explores his numerous percussive objects.
4. In "Pakistani Pomade," Schlippenbach builds an astonishingly dense, rhythmic force aided by Lovens. It subsides only to let in Parker, whose sax enters the group equation like a question before joining what becomes the trio's attempt to demolish the equation or rephrase its terms. At the end of the track we hear Parker's long piercing lines as the group then proceeds to close the equation as if to say they have arrived where no answers are possible and that finally solves the equation. All phraseable questions have no answers here.
5. The trio generates heat. There is no pre-established tonal center. They find the infinite center everywhere. But as the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus wrote, "The true harmony is not visible" and "discord brings unity." The extremes yield a coherence that is *beyond*. Their music thinks deep into the crevices of sound, the micro-structures, the notes between notes between notes. They dig the sonic harvest. It

is deep in the body electric. They are play at the quantum level. All that happens is almost beyond hearing. The trio's formula is constant change. The elapsing frame. Moments fade like old photographs in time. Without fire there is no motion, no light. Again, I am reminded of Heraclitus: "The phases of fire are craving and satiety." There is also that exhaustion that is capable of flowing into bliss when one has plunged deep into the Vortex.

The Schlippenbach Trio takes one into such uncharted sonic territory.

### Recordings

The Schlippenbach Trio. *Pakistani Pomade*. Chicago: Atavistic UMS/ALP24OCD, 2003. CD.



## *Erzuli Maketh Scent*

### Thoughts on Cecil Taylor's Music

... *the unknown can only be approached from the known.*

— Evan Parker

Listening to Cecil Taylor's solo performance, called *Erzuli Maketh Scent* (74:43) that was recorded in Berlin in 1988, I was devastated by the glorious power of this music, the total experience of sound it affords an attentive listener, the absolute sense of a music in perpetual flux equal to life. I'll admit that I never really listened to Taylor's music carefully. The demands he makes on the listener are enormous, and when first encountering his music I was unable to come to terms with it. There is the problem of length; performances easily stretch in excess of an hour, an hour of sustained intensity. Gary Giddens observes that one needs to decide for oneself how one is going to approach this obstacle until it is no longer an obstacle. So much is happening in Taylor's music that one can't possibly be aware of it all at the first hearing. The "influences," all the different kinds of music that go into a typical performance can only be noted with difficulty. This music makes such an approach impossible, except for fleeting moments when one is aware of something that sounds curiously melodic, whether it's European classical or blues based.

What Taylor demands is that a listener abandon expectation along with a preconceived idea about the music. So total is this music. By “total,” I mean so much itself, so totally unbound by the mere tradition. To this extent it is a very personal music but in no way hermetic.

Cecil Taylor’s music is an unexpected music, constantly changing our ideas of what jazz is or European, Classical music for that matter, or even the nature of music itself. It is a “free” music but not naively so – he learned to play with the net up then got rid of it. He has written, “emotions must be controlled to achieve purity.” So, while it’s “free” music, one doesn’t think of his music as wholly improvised. While not composed in any ordinary sense of the word, there is an overriding structure that governs the movement of the solos. Reflex action as encapsulated structure. Each idea a form in perpetual evolution. Its mutability governs a barely noticeable logic. It is essentially based on the reconciliation and variation of opposites. An essential theme in *Erzulie* is the emergence of light from dark, the white and black keys creating a third invisible gray key, a fusion of both. In various passages one can hear Taylor’s accumulation of dark, heavy, bass sounds that thunder and from which emerge spikes of sound that suggest a radiating outward light. Indeed, the dark roar from the piano is oceanic, the light incipient, the whole a process of fusing opposite emotional states. One must note here also the play of sound and silence. One thinks of Monk and then doesn’t.

Of course, Taylor’s music is not music to snap your fingers along to, and it’s certainly not background music either; but this is not to say that the music doesn’t “swing.” Even “swing” is just part of the larger vocabulary of this music and there is the violence that eventually gives over to a meditative space. He has said, in an interview published in *Hambone*, no. 12:

Well I don’t know what jazz is. And what most people think of as jazz I don’t think that’s what it is at all. As a matter of

fact I don't think the word has any meaning at all, but that's another conversation.

The blues are present if for only a split-second development that is dispensed with for something else, a new sound shape, which is evolved almost simultaneously before taking over the previous sound in volume. This dialogue is continual and confounds our expectations. Just as we think we've hitched a ride on some melodic statement we watch it develop and rise only to give way and ground us; but soon there is the uplift again. Steady now. We're never fully grounded or in the air but somehow in a glorious transit somewhere in the middle. Such a dynamic range requires complete attention from a listener. We must be prepared to give ourselves completely over to the music or it will lose its powerful effect. This is part of Taylor's aesthetic. His promise, also, that the music rewards careful listening.

In terms of length, how do we solve the problem? For me there is no way to listen to Taylor's music in excerpts. No way of listening to *Erzulie Maketh Scent* in sections. Each finished piece is part of the Total Work and cannot be understood partially. Just like Classical music but unlike rock and roll. There is so much happening one is bound to pick something up at the expense of something else, so no single listen will amount to a complete understanding. The entire picture will remain unclear, with the sense that you've missed something. An appreciation of Taylor's music (I am thinking of the solos in particular and the music on the FMP Berlin 1988 box set in general, where Taylor was joined with many of the foremost improvisors in Europe, in duets and larger groups, including a whole orchestras) requires a familiarity with modernist, European music as well as Free Jazz in America and Europe. Ironically, Taylor's music mostly upsets those with a seemingly wide knowledge of jazz and is appreciated by diverse others whose main listening is to rock and indie music. But that's the way it is for better or for worse. Taylor's music is not ornamental or artificial. It's like real life. Not elevator music or easy swing the Ellington way. It is what the Total Music sounds like.

**Recordings**

Taylor, Cecil. *Erzuli Maketh Scent*. FMP, 1998. CD.

## The Ganelin Trio's *Ancora Da Capo*

The work of the Russian improvisational group, The Ganelin Trio, is evidence of a development in Free Jazz behind the iron curtain of censorship. The trio had performed for almost thirteen years before their music became known in the West, as a result of which they were able to perform at a concert in England in 1984. This was due to the efforts of Leo Fagin of Leo Records who distributed tapes of the group. With the curtain drawn, availability of the Ganelin Trio's recordings is less sporadic and their exposure in the West can be seen as an important historical event. It showed that there was musical freedom behind the Iron Curtain. This freedom is at the very heart of jazz.

The Ganelin Trio's music was an advance of the Free Jazz experiments of the sixties, but they were unique. There is an interesting use of the theatrical. Their collective improvisation recalls the work of the earliest masters of New Orleans jazz. There are also elements of Classical music, in its formality and structural sense. They can be cool and swinging in the way that has been associated with West Coast jazz in the fifties, but they can also be as "free" as late Coltrane or Albert Ayler, yet not without a sense of humor. The entire history of jazz is compressed in their music. Importantly, their freedoms are circumscribed within a form. There is a sense in which the music is "composed." But here we are dealing with a form that does not restrict or inhibit but is elastic enough to liberate.

A work by the Ganelin Trio can be seen as a large-scale dramatic performance. Each “act” or section reveals another key into their world. It is playful but serious; the actors are not too formal in their delivery. The work exhilarates as it teases the intellect. Below is a series of my impressions of the Ganelin Trio while listening to their recording, *Ancora Da Capo*, released in 1997 on Leo Records. The members of the group are Vyacheslav Ganelin on piano, basset, percussion, electric guitar; Vladimir Tarasov on drums, percussion, bells, talking drum; and Vladimir Chekasin on alto and tenor sax, wooden flute, clarinet, basset-horn, violin, percussion, voice.

First, repeated knocks. Then the sound of bells, of blocks, and an assortment of other percussive sounds, all of which sketches a beat. Tarasov is very effective here. We are in a formal, highly stylized space. Now Ganelin urges a melody from the piano. Sketches it, develops it, punctuates the silence. Chekasin on sax in the background, accenting, developing his own lines. Next a space opens for dialogue between piano and horn. Anxious, frenetic, searching. Chekasin switches to bird calls. The intensity builds. Chekasin wilder. Ganelin inside the piano, scratching, scraping the strings. A sound strangely appealing. Then a dark stream of heavy bass sounds. This is the basset, a small keyboard instrument. A tragic, ominous sound. Theatrical.

Chekasin on sax: a primitive force. The animal banging at the bars, unleashing energies that lie buried under the dome of civilization. It is a sound that is violent, relentless, insistent. A listener can feel the sound welling up from the lower regions, the Underworld. In his book, *The Body of Myth*, J. Nigro Sansonese, writes:

Stereognosis (body knowledge or visceral feeling). The first word: The source of visceral proprioception (roughly internal touch or feeling) the body below the nostrils associated with taste (gustation) and touch (feeling). In myth the first world is described variously as Hell, Hades, The Infernal regions, The Pit, and so on. Also as The Sea: the sea of feeling.

This is before cognition or perception, the rudiments of civilization. It is below the foundations, gestating in the lower consciousness. Sound hits the listener like a revelation. It overwhelms. It is the domain of the nerve. The energy of the muscle. It is internal, pre-language, infantile, unabashed: the wonder of creation.

In this context, the title *Ancora Da Capo* (*Again from the Head*) takes on an ironic sense. That highly formal space is criticized in the piece. Or better yet, it is a mental space into which feelings enter. Heart and Mind. The overarching structure is not abandoned. That would lead to chaos. Cognition, for Sansonese, is the “third world,” that of thought, intellect, the head above the brow: “In myth the third world is also described as a mystic Sea—the sea of thought—bounding the island of the second world (perception) from above.” Thought mirrors feeling.

The piece as a whole is strangely formal, structural, almost “composed” in the broadest sense of the term. It is, in the words of the poet Clark Coolidge, “sound as thought.” An ocean wave not a steel beam. A wave tearing at the rocks. The visceral energy impinges upon the form, destabilizes it, and gives it dimension, depth. Humanizes, as it disrupts. Liberates as it questions the very foundations. It does not reject form utterly. It seeks, ultimately, new forms. The unsayable seeks language, however insufficient it is for its purposes. It seeks to materialize. The word as flesh. Note that at the end of *Ancora Da Capo*, part 2, the trio breaks into a folk anthem. This is the ironic joy of liberation. Also, the humor.

Finally, The Ganelin Trio plays out the drama of this story.

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## Richard Twardzik's *Trio*

I just came across that doomsday prediction again, that jazz will not survive the twentieth century. It's quoted in the new *Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD*, which attributes it to Austrian flugelhorn player Franz Koglmann, who believes there is a need for structure now. Penguin editors, Richard Cook and Brian Morton, point out that great works in any genre, such as film, for example, or Elizabethan drama and Baroque music, are made when that genre "appears to be exhausted." A few years ago, there was an exhibition of late-Byzantine art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art which argued convincingly for a reconsideration of the great art produced when the Byzantine Empire was collapsing. What was later characteristic of the new art was the way it absorbed elements from the Far East, as far as China. This eclecticism was the hallmark of its beauty.

This seems to me to be a useful context in which to regard the history of jazz, particularly at points when the music was threatened by marginalization and persecution. Bop rose from the ashes of the Big Band era. Soloists emerged from the anonymity of large-scale arrangements. Think of Thelonious Monk inscribing his own private language for piano. In the sixties, Free Jazz rolled over the scene like a boulder in a field of daisies. In Jazz Fusion, musical forms blended and in Third Stream, jazz merged with classical idioms. Cool Jazz, Hard Bop, Cubana Bop,

and Bossa Nova were new personas of jazz that arose when the music needed an added push.

It is precisely during times of cultural decline that artistic production seems to create strange and attractive forms. These are eclectic times. Times to borrow and transform. Times when jazz wears a mask of many colors. And it is a time of ferocious personalism, almost hermetic in its insistence on a private language to express a personal truth. Consider Coltrane's Eastern influences. The music of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Bud Powell, comes quickly to mind in the realm of Bop. Later, Cecil Taylor appears as a great cipher to be solved by listeners. Much less heard, although often revered, is pianist Richard Twardzik, who was destined for obscurity. He made few recordings and only one in a studio. It's called *Trio*, and he shares it with West Coast pianist Russ Freeman. The recording date for the Twardzik session is 1954. He is twenty-three years old. In less than a year, he would overdose on heroin.

Of course, we don't know what would have happened if he had made more recordings, but we know a lot about what he did while he was here. Barely out of his teens, he was playing in esteemed jazz circles. His recordings leave a trace of this activity, but they tease more than they satisfy. According to *The Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, he played Bop in Boston in 1951 with Serge Chaloff and participated in a broadcast with Charlie Parker. He worked with Charlie Mariano from 1951 to '52 and toured with Lionel Hampton. After recording with Chaloff and as a leader, both in 1954, he joined Chet Baker for a European tour in 1955. For that sole studio date in 1954, Twardzik chose Carson Smith on bass and Peter Littman on drums. The seven tracks are made up of four standards and three originals, including "Albuquerque Social Swim," which has a curious structure of halting rhythms and sudden stops. Jazz improvisation plays against classical pretension, then resolves in an unlikely marriage between the two. This is Twardzik's wit at work, in response to what he referred to as "some young intellectuals in Albuquerque

with their pompous pronouncements to awkward pauses.” And he added, “But they liked jazz music.”

On the track, he demonstrates how those “awkward pauses” define jazz rhythm. In Twardzik’s hands, his responses appear purposely, pompously, classical. But what holds the piece together is the oddly harmonious interplay. The one Gershwin selection, “Bess, You Is My Woman,” is given a thoughtful reading by Twardzik, who creates a rumbling darkness with his left hand that puts the light in sharp relief. The slow first part of the piece achieves a solemn quality that later unleashes a torrent of constantly changing emotional states. This gives his interpretation its distinctive dramatic quality. The original, “Yellow Tango,” is a good example of Twardzik’s adeptness at rhythmical variation. Think Bud Powell. Here, you can feel him digging deep into that rhythmic core with intensity and abandon.

“Round Midnight” is unbound rhythmically and harmonically, and is taken at a slow, dreamlike, pace, ominous and enigmatic. Twardzik gives Monk’s tune a mysterious floating quality, reminiscent of Debussy. He is harmonically subtle with dark and light notes, painting night as remembrance and desire. For Twardzik, “Round Midnight,” is a door to the senses, ardently opened and quickly shut. It is a performance of Monk’s tune that can stand with the best.

In the standard, “I’ll Remember April,” Twardzik uses classical elements like the block chords Brubeck would later popularize. I can hear that rumbling left hand, generating darkness, investing the piece with a sense of momentum and drama.

About the original, “A Crutch for the Crab,” Twardzik wrote, “The idea ... came from watching the hands of Polish pianist Jan Smeterlin, as they scurried crablike into the keys.” Listening to Twardzik you feel like you’re submerged in a quiet sense of otherworldliness. Think Debussy again or Alban Berg’s kind of lyricism.

Twardzik closes the album with the standard, “Just One of Those Things.” But his is a very personal interpretation. It is wholly Twardzik. His music is always personal and sometimes calls up the debate between jazz and classical music. He finds

common ground. He is harmonically and rhythmically experimental with a unique sense of song structure. His wit and humor teases and delights listeners, catching them unaware. At the same time, he was quite serious about his work: "Development is not my primary consideration. The ability to project every changing emotions or moods, plus rhythmic freedom, is far more important to me."

Twardzik succumbed to the same fate as Charlie Parker and so many others in the bop circle. Bop was a fiercely personal music whose fires burned all the brighter for having burned in the shortest time before going out. It was an eclectic music, one where musicians were interested in the Classical composers and also forms like the tango or Cuban music. In fact, Bop's repertoire consisted mainly of a few popular songs from the prewar era that musicians completely transformed into new songs on which they based their improvisations.

In a period of artistic decline, everything is up for grabs. Ruins lie stranded on the roadside. They can be reclaimed, reformed, and cast in new light. There is reconsideration and reappraisal. Bop flourished up at Minton's Playhouse in the absolute darkness of one of jazz's lowest periods, in terms of sales and appreciation. But, at the same time, it ushered in a new approach to improvisation, a new sound. It was a constellation rising in the night sky and Richard Twardzik was one of its many brilliantly, ill-fated stars.

## Recordings

Freeman, Russ, and Richard Twardzik. *Trio*. Los Angeles: Pacific Jazz Records, 1989. CD.

## Stan Getz and Arthur Blythe

Two albums exemplify the soul and freedom that is jazz: Stan Getz's *At the Shrine* from 1954 and Arthur Blythe's *Lenox Avenue Breakdown* from 1979. What characterizes Stan Getz's playing on the live recording, *At the Shrine*, is a looseness with regard to song structure and melody. This allows Getz to utilize a full rush of ideas that are not bound by formality or strict adherence to a rule. This is the master caught at the beginning of his tenure at Verve Records. The roughly hewn aspect of his work here, reveals Getz as a vibrant, restless creator. He maintains a consistently high level of invention throughout due to his ability to improvise countermelodies with expertise and maintain a delicate balance of tension and release.

This album plays close to a kind of freedom not usually associated with Getz's work or with the West Coast sound with which he was, at this time, affiliated with. His lyricism never falters, yet he rides the circumference of the outer reaches often. At the conclusion of the second track, "Lover Man," Getz admits, "We almost lost it there," but he never does. His ideas have a logical, albeit surprising, continuity, that allow for an organic development of the tune. Trombonist Bob Brookmeyer accompanies Getz throughout, adding just the right amount of bonhomie and tension to allow for some interesting counterpoints. His piece, "Open Country," displays a New Orleans-style, easy swing. Brookmeyer demonstrates the abilities that establish him

as an effective partner for clarinetist, Jimmy Giuffre, later in the record. The partnership of Getz and Brookmeyer, reprised in later years, makes this album one of the most revealing and experimental in Getz's very large discography.

Arthur Blythe's *Lennox Avenue Breakdown*, immediately recalls the jazz experiments of Charles Mingus. Over imaginative and soulful riffs, the group's improvisations break into free improvisations, radically departing from the song structure with a particular blend of soul. Blythe, on alto sax, injects fierce blues into his own personal equation, that is quite free. His solo on "Odessa" is a majestic and inventive take on the blues.

On the title track, flutist James Newton is particularly striking, playing in the tradition of Eric Dolphy and even taking it farther Out. Guitarist, James "Blood" Ulmer, lays down an accompanying chorus like a shaman casting the proper temperature, inciting the soloists. His solo on "Odessa" is quietly fierce and determined. Drummer Jack DeJohnette's skill fuses the parts to the whole with fire and authority. Bassist Cecil Mcbee has a dark, soulful sound. However, the real shocker is Bob Stewart on tuba! His innovative use of the tuba in 1979 was an important contribution to jazz because of the demands the instrument makes on its musicians. The brilliance of this record is that through imaginative instrumentation, Blythe and company create a particular urban energy, one that blends deep soul with jazz freedom.

I'd like to close with a quote from soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy: "Music is just out there, and you have to leap, take a chance, go off the ledge, off the edge." Both Getz and Blythe, on these two albums, take chances and take the music far out, with their feet firmly on the ground.

## Recordings

Blythe, Arthur. *Lennox Avenue Breakdown*. Sony, 1995. CD.  
(Import)

Getz, Stan *At the Shrine*. New York: Verve Records, 1990. CD.

## Jimmy Giuffre

### A Note on the *Trio* with Paul Bley and Steve Swallow

In the space of three years, from 1958 to '61, the Giuffre trio's advance on group dynamics was astonishing. The cool, folksy sound of Giuffre's early trio with Jim Hall moved in a complex and dynamic direction. Giuffre's clarinet playing dispensed with the dark, wooden sounds of the chalumeau register to embrace the higher registers, as he overcame his technical limitations with a vengeance. Some of the solos on the *Free Fall* (1962) record are his most antagonistic and yet controlled. The earlier live record, *Emphasis, Stuttgart* (1961), shows the significant shift in Giuffre's direction with the wailing and piercing sounds he gets from the clarinet as he moves to the upper registers. There Giuffre's playing is as free as any Ayler. But within the group, the whole is controlled, the entire focus of Bley/Swallow/Giuffre is in sync; they open up the space so the sound can move out.

Giuffre's melodies are simple but very effective. They articulate with few notes. There is the haunting, primordial theme of "Cry, Want" or the urgent ascendant movement of "Emphasis," which embodies the very meaning of the title. This acts as a kind of poetics for the trio. The melodies are subtle and unorthodox in their ability to "swing" the group into improvisation. In the

themes for “Sonic” and “Whirr,” you can most clearly see the influence of Classical composition on Giuffre’s music. The pieces have a distinctly composed feel about them. In fact, they are composed. These themes bracket the trio’s free improvisations. The whole has the feeling of a Classical recital. While being in a sense “bound” by the theme they are never limited by it. In the same way, a set rhyme scheme binds a poet and provokes a play of words, which could, without the form, potentially go nowhere. Theirs is a perilous freedom.

Giuffre himself has written that Debussy’s piece for flute, viola, and harp was the initial impetus for starting the early Giuffre Three. Incidentally, the first record I heard by the trio was *Emphasis, Stuttgart*, and certain pieces, while suggesting French Impressionist music, more immediately recalled the works for clarinet and piano by Alban Berg. There is an explosive violence that threatens to erupt at the edges of their music. Note the dramatic “explosion” of sound that occurs midway through the “Suite for Germany,” where Paul Bley thrashes the keys, and Giuffre’s clarinet emerges slowly as if a solemn witness to the wreckage. It seemed to me, at that time, that Giuffre’s music had more to do with German classical music, the twelve-tone school, particularly Schoenberg’s song cycle, and the aforementioned works by Berg, than jazz. Which is to say that what struck me most about Giuffre’s music was the sense of a “Free Jazz,” an almost violent reconsideration of jazz improvisation, while implying Modernist, Classical modes.

When one thinks of the passé idea of theme, variation, and recapitulation, at least during the sixties, in the Free Jazz scene, one realizes that the Giuffre Three was creating a new idiom for jazz improvisation. No potential standards here. What can be off-putting to a jazz fan is the cerebral nature of Giuffre’s music. It has a studiousness about it, a kind of controlled air, and it is at times atonal, formalist. The later trio’s relation to swing is a kind of tease, as if they’re asking themselves, tongue in cheek, how far can we freely improvise on a line until we’re brought back home to a fixed beat? Or to what extent does the beat lock us

into a groove we can only hope to get out of at our peril? Or how can we sustain the improvisation and make sense in the greater context of the piece? These reconsiderations of the basic jazz tradition are at the center of Giuffre's music. Is it their music's thesis? Maybe. But, *Thesis* (1961) as the title of a jazz record? Not without the dry humor which pervades the trio's music; you'll also find yourself tapping your feet at times in the face of your intellect.

### Recordings

Giuffre, Jimmy. *Emphasis/Stuttgart*. hatART, 1993. CD.

———. *Free Fall*. New York: Columbia, 1998. CD.



## Dave Douglas's *Strange Liberation*

Trumpet player, Dave Douglas, is perhaps the most individualistic of players on the Contemporary jazz scene. He is essentially a melodic player, but his solos hit his listeners from far-left field. Douglas's recent installment to his ever-widening musical discography, *Strange Liberation*, explores the idea of freedom and control in music. It is a poetics of in-and-out playing. In the liner notes, Douglas writes, "It has been said that freedom without limitations is meaningless. This band explores the border of freedom and bends the rules with a compelling logic and passion." Douglas expands on the idiom without forsaking the "musical." He continues, "It is strangely liberating to put myself in a new situation where I am forced to admit that I have never done this before and, in some sense, have no idea what I am doing." This openness with regard to the necessary risks, is evident throughout the album.

*Strange Liberation* exhibits the unique perspective that is essential to jazz. Douglas borrows from a number of sources inside, and outside, the jazz tradition. The track, "Skeeter-ism" uses a Monkian rhythm. This is also apparent on "The Frisell Dream," which serves as a guide. Bill Frisell's opening guitar riffs recall the musical style of rockabilly, in the humorously titled "Rock of Billy." Here the rhythm section sets up a nice sizzling groove behind Douglas's swinging trumpet and Frisell's tasty chorus, which effectively uses distortion. This is solid, swinging

jazz with just the right use of experimental effects. Both Frisell and Uri Caine, who plays “Fender Rhodes” on this album, give Douglas and Chris Potter, on tenor sax, an interesting and varied harmonic base to launch from. Together they evoke the enigma of dream and memory, which is essential to this record.

A key song is “Just Say This,” which expresses, harmonically, a balance of melancholy and hope. The sound from Douglas’s muted trumpet is like the call from a weary traveler in the desert who has seen what others can only imagine, the ideal city or the unutterable nightmare, and returns with message of this song. Frisell creates a sense of empty spaces, the desert, but it is also a plea. Chris Potter’s sax cries out for hope, for the necessary strength. The band closes in a unison passage, hope triumphs over despair, there is a ray of light in the distance. Of this song, Douglas writes, “‘Just Say This’ is a melody that came to me while walking around Manhattan in September 2001. It was hard to finish the piece, coming as it does with such a heavy burden of tragedy and suffering. For me the music was the only possible comment about such a horrible crime.” Where no words are possible, music offers an alternate medium of expression that speaks without words, saying itself and nothing more.

As a collective statement, “Single Sky,” with its harmonic subtleties, effective unison passages, and solos, is a powerful opening track, even though it only clocks in at just over two minutes. Frisell’s excellent guitar work, on another gem, “Mountains From the Train,” allows the listener to actually hear those train wheels shedding sparks on the tracks. The song drifts into a meditative space. At the song’s conclusion, one is no longer on a track, on the ground, but fading into the distances, along the road, above the earth, in the air. Douglas’s solo on “Seventeen” is rhythmically strong and soulful, as well as equally restrained and piercing. It is Douglas’s homage to the great, Blue Note sound. Douglas’s concept of the music is utterly unique. He incorporates Middle-Eastern, rock, and Classical sounds and, through his own individual alchemy, generates something fresh and totally contemporary. When listening to his music,

one realizes that if one had any doubt about the future of jazz, Douglas's music would make you think twice.

### **Recordings**

Douglas, Dave. *Strange Liberation*. Camden: Bluebird Records  
BMG 82876508182, 2004. CD.



VI

PASOLINI, BALESTRINI,  
ARTAUD



## On Pier Paolo Pasolini

On the night of November 1, 1975, Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>1</sup> was brutally murdered on the beach at Ostia, near Rome. The next day his body was found. Controversy surrounding his death persists to this day. What is indisputable is that Pasolini's death concluded a life spent engaged with the forces that he determined were transforming Italian society for the worse.

Pasolini's early poems, mostly written during his stay in Casarsa, a town in the Italian region of Friuli, retain an air of hopefulness despite the anguish of his emerging sense of his own difference. His homosexuality is at once an ecstatic emotional experience and, at this time in his life, an unrealizable dream, a curse. The exchange of feeling between men is "a sterile energy ... that refuses to give in to life / and is a ceaseless reminder of death." In his silence, he detests "these dreams / where sin dons the mask of innocence." The language of his silence is religious and defiant. He is "possessed with hatred for the City of God." God stands for any kind of repressive authority. In opposition to the Catholic world, he invokes a more ancient and sensual paganism: "I am the virgin youth humiliated by Pan / the milk and blood of Apollo on my face."

Life in Casarsa profoundly affected the young Pasolini. He found there an image of social perfection in the natural world

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1 All the following translations of Pasolini's poems are my own.

uncontaminated by industry, in the rhythm of the dialect spoken at home and in the peasant life, innocent and pure. His sympathies are not with the adult world, but rather with the “young men wrestling in the courtyard below. They are violent yet pure as the rays of the sun / that tans their backs.” These are the men whose lives he would dramatize on the screen in his first film, *Acattonne* (1961). During his time in Casarsa, Pasolini’s feelings would form a link: “Casarsa = life = happiness = Susanna [his mother] = the Friulian dialect of the peasantry” and the opposite: “urbanism = hypocrisy = moralism = Carlo Alberto [his father] = the standard Italian of the educated bourgeoisie.” Pasolini writes, “It was my mother who showed me how poetry can be really written, not just studied at school.” Pasolini’s mother was a source of acceptance and encouragement throughout his life. In contrast, his father had worked for the fascists under Mussolini. Disillusioned after the war, he began to drink and was abusive in the household. Nevertheless, he did follow the events in his son’s life, collecting news clippings whenever there was mention of him.

Italy was in a state of transition after the war and the spirit of the resistance was still felt by intellectuals. There was a sense of solidarity among the class with which Pasolini identified throughout his life, the sub-proletariat. Six months before the fall of Mussolini, Pasolini argued that European youth were still connected to a humanist and democratic tradition that predated the fascist regime. To speak of literature as distinct from life at this time seems now a kind of hermeticism, but, in fact, it was a way of resisting and refusing to support the fascist regime. The hermeticism of these early poems is political. Pasolini joined the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI, Italian Communist Party) in 1945. Almost immediately problems arose regarding Pasolini’s complex views of party doctrine. From 1947 to 1949 he had a teaching post near Casarsa. During this time, he was expelled from the Communist Party due to accusations of indecent public behavior and corruption of youth. In 1964, he would write,

An atheistic philosophy is not the only possible philosophy of Marxism — especially since it is true that the Marxist base among workers was always, in its majority, believers, and also at the higher reaches [of the PCI] there have been many Catholic Marxists.

His relation to the Communist Party was complicated throughout his life by both his homosexuality and his unorthodox Christianity. He viewed the death of his brother Guido, a partisan who was killed by his own comrade, as a symbol for the call to action. In 1970 he would write, “I think there can be no Communist who would disapprove of the actions of the partisan Guido Pasolini” and that what is important above all is a “critical lucidity which destroys words and conventions and goes to the bottom of things, inside their secret and inalienable truth.” The intellectuals of Pasolini’s generation believed that their work was a kind of labor that was socially useful and not simply diversion or entertainment. Despite Pasolini’s battle for equal rights and against the evils of party discipline, he was often considered too spiritual to be a reliable comrade. His complex recasting of the secular and the sacred in politics seemed contradictory or at best paradoxical. In this respect, the word *bestemmia* takes on an added significance for Pasolini. It has the dual meaning of “curse” and “blasphemy.” For Pasolini, the State was inseparable from the Church, and both came under attack. His “virgin joy” is a “sacrilege.”

In 1950 Pasolini was forced to leave Friuli because of a scandal concerning his homosexuality. It was the first of many. The world he found on the outskirts of Rome was like a new universe. He saw the pagan world of the borgate, outcasts who seemed to live according to their own natural laws in opposition to the arbitrary doctrines of the State. Their world preserved an archaic tradition. To Pasolini, this was the source of their mystery and their attraction. They were atavistic and mythical. He was Medea, a foreigner in his own land, one whose beliefs were no longer valid in a world devoid of the sacred and heroic quality of myth. In Rome, Pasolini was inspired to write two nov-

els, *The Ragazzi* (1955) and *A Violent Life* (1959). The success of these novels would mark the beginning of many accusations of obscenity, defamation of religion and indecency that would continue throughout his life, resulting in thirty-three appearances before the court. In these works, Pasolini showed people as they really are, with their own actions and speaking their own dialect. He was concerned with reality, turning his back on the decadent aestheticism of his early work. He exposed a vision that was contrary to the progressive ideals of the revolutionary or of the State. No one wanted to believe that this other world existed.

As Europe's infrastructure was rebuilt with American aid, the Christian Democrats began to dominate the polls in Italy. The Left fought a losing battle as the country moved towards a more conservative outlook. In the face of this, Pasolini argued that the intellectual must turn inward, become introspective, even diaristic. The intensely personal becomes a route to the political. The majority was in favor of a version of Christian Democracy that promised a rejuvenated and healthy Italy after the war. Pasolini, like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, did not believe the wounds of Fascism were healed. He held up a mirror to society, but the masses turned him away. Very quickly Italy began to change and there was a return of the repressed. He speaks of the "feigned vivacity of the bourgeoisie / masking the age-old fear / of the honest poor." The people are changing, adopting consumerist and bourgeois values in favor of a more modern, European sensibility. He writes, "these politicians are blind and hungry animals ... this nation crumbles under the weight of a progressive optimism." At this time Pasolini was struggling to enter the political arena, using as his means language and the private awareness of his difference. He writes, "I am Orpheus, Oedipus, Medea, Narcissus. The mythical landscape is real." His is a world outside time and space, pre-historical, a world with the epic quality of myth. There is growing unrest between Pasolini and the Italian Communist Party. He writes "you who swear allegiance to the red flag / must realize your theories in action /

because the Other exists.” But at the end of the fifties Pasolini begins to sense that “the red flag will be an empty sign.”

In 1958 to 1959 he writes a series of poems called “Humiliating and Offensive Epigrams.” Here, as in the diaristic poems of the early fifties, Pasolini analyzes his position with regard to the State:

TO MYSELF

This guilty world consumes its own shit  
to fill its bulging gut. It despises  
our of sheer sadistic glee.  
I'm the guiltiest though I haven't sinned.

My heart's a burnt stone.

He writes, “Don't hustle yourself / they'll never forgive us our passion / neither you nor I / will ever be off the hook,” and later, “Nothing ... escapes the disciplined eye of the Catholic police.” For Pasolini, the “dogma of religion / is a false subtext to the inner life.” He is engaged in “eroticizing the dead Latin / of a useless pontiff.” In “To Prince Barberini,” he writes,

You've been a coward your whole life.  
Now you rise to the occasion, proud, defiant, with a new  
campaign.  
But you're just a rotten corpse,  
unsure of yourself as always.

By the end of the fifties, Pasolini's work had decisively shifted from the personal to the political.

During the sixties Pasolini also began to work in another medium, film. His poetry of the fifties was an engaged poetry, but he felt unable to reach a larger audience. The filmic image would replicate the “real” in a way that language could not. He makes *Accatone* (1961). The popularity of his films from this first through *Oedipus Rex* (1967), *Theorem* (1968), *Medea* (1969), the

*Trilogy of Life — Decameron* (1971), *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), *Arabian Nights* (1974) — and *Salò* (1975) insured his visibility and allowed him to project his vision to the Italian people, unimpeded by the limits of language. The films were met with outrage, litigation, fury, misunderstanding, and disgust. This all seemed to fuel the fire of his growing anger at a world that had demolished the mythic, pagan roots of Christianity. His ideas clashed both with believers and unbelievers, the Church and the Communists. Pasolini writes,

The atheism of a militant Communist is the essence of religion compared to the cynicism of a capitalist: in the first, one can always find those moments of idealism, of desperation, of psychological violence, of conscious will, of faith — which are elements, even degraded, of religion — in the second one finds only Mammon.

Pasolini was not a believer, yet he held that all things were sacred. This was bound to confuse the critics who were seeking any chance to devalue his way of thinking.

He gives a portrait of the capitalist in his poem “Ballads of Violence,” written in 1963. It is also a characterization of the typical bourgeois sensibility. In an earlier poem, he wrote of a split in his own personality between himself and the “barbarian” that resides within him,

He imitates my mania for analysis  
 so I look ridiculous when I call his move.  
 He crushes my attempts to reveal him.

He grins at this naïve passion.

About my sincerity  
 he makes an obscene joke.

I can't get away from him.

I'm followed in the street.  
 I feel him in my bed at night.  
 I can't rid myself of this stench of death.

This is the anxiety and neurosis of the bourgeoisie. In the "Ballads of Violence" he is a weak man, a dwarf, a mediocrity, a failure, abnormal, a servant, decadent, immoral though mild mannered, a pig, poor. And yet the weak man will kill in the name of God, a man who considers himself a failure will try to even the score, a servant will obey the words of his fascist master, after all a game is just a game. In the last poem of the sequence Pasolini reveals that he is speaking of the capitalist. No one is innocent, not the weak or the poor or the abnormal (read: homosexual). The poem traces the movement from the personal to the political. In this poem, Pasolini is speaking of the return of certain repressive, fascist attitudes and behaviors and of the unavoidable complicity of the people. In the opening shots of *Theorem*, we understand that a factory is given over to the people. Pasolini asks if this is not really an attempt to turn the workers into the bourgeoisie. Doctrinaire Marxism is insufficient to explain the present time. The innocence and simplicity of the poor is devalued. Even in 1963, in this poem, one can see the beginning of ideas that would come to horrifying fruition in *Salò*.

This same year Pasolini visited the Holy Land in search of locations for his film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. At this time Israel and Jordan were at war. He visited Galilee, Jordan, Damascus, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. Pasolini writes that the Holy Land was "a practical disappointment. But corresponding with this, ... an aesthetic revelation." He discovered only a few hours after his arrival at Tel Aviv "reforestation works, modern agriculture, light industry." Israel was becoming too modern to serve as an authentic site for his film. According to Pasolini the effects of industry directly impacted the people. He wrote, "I realized it was all no use." Instead he filmed in those parts of Italy where he believed, and by 1964 he was still right in doing so, that a "Southern peasant ... is still living in a magical culture where miracles are real like the culture in which Matthew wrote." The

product of his visit was a sequence of poems entitled "Israel" (1964). Here, he voices his disappointment:

The city  
 where they live is blind ...  
 Why do they act  
 Like the children of bourgeois Aryans, and of the great and  
 stupid descendants  
 of the West? Why this unpoetical state? Perhaps they do not  
 think  
 they will die here?

He is writing here of Israel, but these words could apply to what he saw happening in Italy. The corruption by industry of a mythical/sacred site and its people is a central concern in the poems of the sixties and seventies. He writes,

We find ourselves at the start of what will probably be the ugliest epoch in the history of man: the epoch of industrial alienation. ... When the classical world is exhausted, when all the peasants and all the craftsman have died, when industry has made the cycle of production unstoppable, then will our history be over.

With *Salò* finished, Pasolini turned to other projected works. One of these, *Bestemmia* (Blasphemy) was an unfinished work from 1967. It was part screenplay and part narrative poem. I've included selections to illustrate the cinematic nature of his writing at this time. One can envision the poem as a film with dialogue:

There occurs a great silence.  
 The companions of Blasphemy  
 collect around him in a circle  
 next to a fire that illuminates the twilight.  
 They ask him about life.

Then Blasphemy/Pasolini speaks,

Many of you, before the light is extinguished,  
will deny my words and therefore  
life will be on your side.

During the late sixties, as Pasolini became more politically engaged and gained greater visibility in the public eye because of his films, he also withdrew into himself more and felt increasingly alienated from the world around him. He imagines this dialogue between Pasolini and Blasphemy:

“He [God] is a curse upon my life.”  
“And why does he curse you?”  
“Because I wish to be blessed by a man.”  
“And what is the fate of a man  
who desires to be blessed by men and not God.”  
“The will to die”  
“By the hand of God?”  
“No, by the hand of a man.”

Here, Pasolini is attacking the Church which he believed was no longer an independent religious organization but was indistinguishable from the State, serving the same interests and ignoring the people.

Pasolini wrote that the “crisis of the sixties” produced “the neo-capitalist siren on the one hand” and the end of the revolution on the other. As a result, there was a “void, the terrible existential void.” He witnessed Italy undergo a monumental change in the interests of a progressive “democracy” that valued a consumerist culture over an archaic culture that relied on a tradition of the sacred and of myth. He believed the people of the borgate, who embodied these values, were on the verge of extinction. He saw that the terrifying result was that “novelty” took precedence over the “authentic.” The bosses are these “severe men, in double-breasted suits, elegant, who take off and land in airplanes ... sit at grandiose desks like thrones ... these

men with faces of dogs or of saints.” And those who are “humble men dressed in rags or in clothes mass produced ... who pass hour after hour at jobs without hope ... these men, with faces equal to those of the dead without features or light save for that of life ... are the slaves.” For Pasolini, all this would soon change dramatically as the distinction between boss and slave was blurred. He witnessed the destruction of an entire class. He writes that

for a young person today, the situation presents itself altogether differently: for him it is much more difficult to look at the bourgeoisie objectively, through the viewpoint of another class. Because the bourgeoisie is triumphant, is making bourgeois out of the workers on the one hand, out of the peasants and ex-colonialists on the other. In effect, through neo-capitalism, the bourgeoisie is becoming the human condition.

Italian society had become a pigsty. But he would write in 1974 that “the current destruction of values does not imply an *immediate* substitution with other values, with their good and bad sides, with the necessary improvement of living standards that they would bring together with a real cultural progress ... and here is the great and tragic danger.” He compares the industrialization of the past ten years in Italy with the industrialization in Germany in the thirties. He writes, “It was in these conditions that consumerism opened the path, after the recession of the 1920s, to Nazism.”

While shooting *La Ricotta* (1963), Pasolini met the young man who would become his intimate companion for many years, marking his longest relationship. Giovanni “Ninetto” Davoli was born on October 11, 1948 in San Pietro a Maida, Calabria. He was fourteen when he met Pasolini. Pasolini had just turned forty. Pasolini wrote, “Everything about him has a magical air ... an endless reserve of happiness.” Soon Ninetto became part of Pasolini’s entourage and started appearing in his films. He was first cast in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* and appeared in many other films, culminating with *Arabian*

*Nights* in 1974. He has said of his relationship to Pasolini, "In me, he found the naturalness of the world he knew growing up." This was the world that Pasolini saw devastated and ultimately obliterated by the changes that Italy was undergoing in the sixties.

During the filming of the "Canterbury Tales," Ninetto told Pasolini that on his return to Rome he intended to marry. Pasolini writes, "I am insane with grief. Ninetto is finished. After almost nine years, there is no more Ninetto. I have lost the meaning of my life. Everything has collapsed around me." In January 1973, Ninetto married. He promised Pasolini that nothing fundamental would change as a result of his marriage. But Pasolini was inconsolable.

The series of poems that I have simply called "Ninetto," begun on August 20, 1971, chart the series of emotional upheavals Pasolini underwent during the time leading up to and after the wedding. He writes that Ninetto "is tired of our relationship. It has lost / all sense of novelty for him. The duty of a new life / distracts him." He writes of Ninetto's fiancée, "She blamed you for your innocent abandonments . . . She wants everything. / She is desperate and without hope, / without compassion." In another poem, he accuses Ninetto, "This love / does not glorify you. It humiliates you. / . . . You love her only if she weeps and is humiliated. / You don't know how to maintain her / nor do you really want to." His anger turns to regret: "But you, so happy, you / the very image of happiness, now / that you are gone from my life." Finally his anger subsides, and he writes on February 1, 1973, "But seeing that you have retained a little love for me / exclusively, this means everything." Pasolini's relationship with Ninetto had changed into something else. Desire had given way to affection and loyalty. Pasolini cast him as Aziz in the *Arabian Nights* a character he described as "joy, happiness, a living ballet." Ninetto's first son was named Pier Paolo.

For Pasolini the men he once loved were victims of what he called an "anthropological genocide." Their faces, their manner of speaking, their bodies had come to disgust him. He wrote, "Mass culture is 'psychoanalysis in reverse' because instead of

curing authoritarian personalities, it helps spawn them.” In a speech made in 1974, Pasolini writes,

How does this substitution of values take place? Today this is happening surreptitiously, through a sort of secret persuasion. While during Marx’s times it happened through explicit and open violence, colonial conquests and violent impositions, today it happens in subtler, more artful and complex ways, and the process is technically much more mature and profound.

In 1969 Pasolini would write, “Nothing is possible anymore. The spirit / of the antibody has exhaled all of you / and the antiseptic power of those in authority has won.” The Resistance “has come to nothing” and “they are all for violence now.”

On November 1, 1975 Pasolini gave his last interview. The next day he was found dead. During the interview Pasolini speaks of Italy after the war, of the feeling among many that it was possible to change the course of history, to ensure that Italy was free of fascist tendencies. Once there was the “evil master” with “pockets full of dollars” and there was the “emaciated widow . . . asking for justice.” The problem was then posed in terms of the class struggle. Does he miss that world? Pasolini again:

No! I miss the poor and genuine people who fought to abolish that master [Fascism] without turning into him. Since they were excluded from everything, nobody had managed to colonize them. I’m scared of these slaves in revolt because they behave exactly like their plunderers, desiring everything and wanting everything at any price. . . . I listen to the politicians — all the politicians — with all their little presumptions and I turn into a madman as they prove they do not know which country they are talking about, they are as far away as the moon. And together with them are the men of letters, the sociologists and the experts in any kind of field.

The denunciation was total. Italy had completely transformed and Pasolini's warnings were ignored. In the late sixties up until his death, those in power preferred to maintain the image of a slightly mad, homosexual provocateur, a corruptor of minors, whose ideology was inconsistent and not to be trusted. It was these kinds of accusations, patently ignorant and false, that kept Pasolini at the forefront of intellectual debates in Italy for more than two decades. He believed that "a liberty without confrontation [was] a mythical liberty, it [was] the liberty of bourgeois liberalism, in the end a pretext." *Salò* marks the end of the old Pasolini. It is a farewell to life as he represented it in the *Trilogy of Life* (1971–74). It is a film about the modern world. He writes, "the collapse of the present implies the collapse of the past. Life is a heap of insignificant and ironical ruins."

*Salò* is, in one sense, a film about complicity. The line between victim and assassin is unclear. The victims are not those men and women of *Accatone* for whom a viewer could feel sympathetic. The world had changed. The victims in *Salò* are in large part bourgeois students or fashion models. Pasolini writes, "If I made them likeable victims who cried and tore at the heart then everyone would leave the movie house after five minutes. Besides, I don't do that because I don't believe it." We are disturbed not so much because we feel a sympathetic connection to the victims but because of the extreme violence of those in power. Pasolini suggests that we, the viewers, are witnessing a mirror image of our own regressive tendencies. We the viewers are complicit with the enemy. In January 1973 Pasolini began writing for the newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*. The articles were collected in two volumes, *Pirate Writings* (1975) and the posthumous *Lutheran Letters* (1976). In the latter he demands that the Christian Democrats be put on trial. Their crimes are

contempt for the citizens  
 manipulation of public funds  
 deals with oil firms  
 with industrialists, with bankers,  
 complicity with the Mafia

treason in the interests of a foreign power  
 collaboration with the CIA  
 illegal use of organizations like SID<sup>2</sup>  
 responsibility for the massacres in Milan, Brescia and Bologna 28<sup>3</sup>  
 (because they have been unable to find the culprits)  
 the destruction of the Italian countryside  
 the anthropological degradation of the Italians  
 (the responsibility all the graver for being unconscious)  
 responsibility for the frightful conditions in schools,  
 hospitals and public institutions,  
 responsibility for the abandonment of the countryside  
 responsibility for the explosion of mass culture  
 of stupid TV programs ...<sup>4</sup>

On November 2, 1975 Pasolini's body was found. On the previous day Pasolini wrote, "... maybe I have already said too much ... maybe I'm wrong after all, but I keep on thinking that we are all in danger." This collection of poems is the testament of a man who lived with uncommon vitality and risk. The poems ask that we take nothing for granted, not the words that govern our daily interactions with each other, nor the official language of those in power. In our recent times we have witnessed the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings on 9/11, the wars in the Middle East, the increasing sense that there is a wealthy class in league with corporate interests that maintains a false reality based on advertising and marketing for profit, Reaganomics, NAFTA, the Bush years, the housing crisis, the extinction of a viable middle class, the destruction of a base of production and the turn towards a service economy, the increasing debt of the country and of ourselves, recession, unemployment, gov-

2 SID is the name of an Italian Intelligence Agency active from 1965-77.

3 In May 1974 several people were killed during a demonstration in Brescia against neo-fascist violence. In December 1969 an explosion shook central Milan provoking controversy since the responsibility for the attacks fell equally on the Left and the far Right.

4 Philo Bregstein, dir., *Whoever Says the Truth Shall Die*, 1981.

ernment bailouts, Iran-Contra, Saddam Hussein, the tea party, the failure of education ... It is the kind of world that Pasolini foresaw and warned us about. In this sense, Pasolini was writing for the future.

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## Funeral Rites

### On Nanni Balestrini's *Blackout*

*To understand Italy one must understand the United States.*

— Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi

Nanni Balestrini's *Blackout* is a requiem for the generation of 1968, whose hopes and ideals were exhausted by the time of the poem's composition in 1979. The original impetus for the poem was the blackout in New York City on July 13, 1977 that lasted for twenty-five hours and drew widespread media attention due to the countless episodes of violence and looting. Balestrini believed this event provided a powerful potential for collaboration with the singer and musician Demetrio Stratos. Balestrini's text was to be a series of works based on the blackout in New York to which Stratos would insert sounds, noises, and his own voice, distorting and manipulating the sound and using film projections and light shows.

But the project was never realized. As a result of the mass arrests in Italy, conducted by chief judge Pietro Calogero on April 7, 1979, Balestrini was indicted for his alleged association with a terrorist group. But the authorities were unable to prove his membership, and when he was released, he fled to France, as so many others were beginning to do. Meanwhile, Stratos fell

seriously ill with bone marrow aplasia and was hospitalized at Memorial Hospital. He died on June 13. What was to have been an electrifying performance of music and text, a call to action, was no longer possible. The performance at the Rotonda della Besana in Milan was cancelled. While in France, Balestrini began to collect the materials that would eventually become the long poem "Blackout." He was creating a map to understand the political climate that had led to his self-imposed exile, examining the sequence of historical events whose consequence was this repression in Italy and asking why no further revolutionary action is possible. In a sense, *Blackout* faithfully records the end of a world, the disappearance of a series of perspectives and ideals that had characterized the late 1960s and '70s during an extraordinary period of creativity and hope.

At one point in the poem Balestrini writes, "This poem should not be published because it is a political manifesto." The historical events with which *Blackout* is concerned began the wave of conflicts in 1968 at the universities and factories (especially the Fiat factory in Turin) and eventually spread throughout the West. The protests culminated in the "troubled autumn" of 1969, eventually involving the entire Italian working class in strikes, demonstrations, and acts of sabotage. In Italy, the effect was a destabilization of the politics of the Center-Left, an alliance of Christian Democrats and Socialists created during the 1964 recession and whose attempts at economic reform were vague and ineffective. The Christian Democrats in particular were considered largely responsible for the rise in power of bourgeoisie class in Italian society and the dominance of the Church on people's lives.

A policy implemented by the Christian Democrats called the *Strategia della Tensione* (Strategy of Tension) went into effect whereby violent acts were staged in order to direct blame upon the opposition. The first of these "farces" was the bombing of the Agricultural Bank of Milan that killed fourteen people on December 2, 1969. It was discovered that the bombs had been planted by the secret service and the Christian Democrats. The

event provided an occasion to accuse the anarchists, and, as a result, the revolutionary movement came under suspicion and was attacked in the press. But the revolutionary movement did not cease, and in the seventies it grew among the youth and among students who mobilized into various groups. One was called *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power). It was made up of workers and neo-Marxist intellectuals, and it was a major presence in the factories of Padua and at the University of Rome.<sup>1</sup>

The numerous collectives forming during this time were opposed to the official doctrine of the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI, Italian Communist Party). In 1969 the PCI was criticized and superseded by the student movement. The final break with the PCI occurred during the "Historical Compromise," the alliance between the PCI and the Christian Democrats, whose result was the people's subordination to the will of Big Capital in the name of economic revival.<sup>2</sup> During this same year the Fiat factory was occupied by thousands of workers who sabotaged machinery, and disrupted the work of disciplined foreman and guards. This was the beginning stage of the movement's "counter-power."

In the early seventies, the workers' movement gained a base on the national level, participating in elections and distancing itself from the old forms of policy making. The discussion in Italy was now directly engaged with political problems, the central problem being the "problem of power." In May 1973 "Workers' Power" dissolved and split into two groups. One went underground and grew increasingly militant eventually becoming the Red Brigade. The other group — Antonio Negri,<sup>3</sup> Franco

1 *Potere Operaio* was active between 1967 and 1973.

2 This alliance came about after the Chilean coup and the oil crisis of 1973. The following years witnessed the rise, both financially and institutionally, of the chemical and energy sectors in world capitalism. This significantly impacted the workers' struggle toward socialization and resulted in layoffs, inflation and chronic unemployment. At the same time the Chilean experience exposed the deficiency of old models of socialist government.

3 Negri is a Marxist sociologist and political philosopher. He wrote many influential books urging "revolutionary consciousness." He was arrested with many others in 1979 and accused of being the leader of the Red Brigade

Piperno,<sup>4</sup> and Oreste Scalzone<sup>5</sup> — went on to create an extra-parliamentary, autonomist movement, the Potere Operaio, whose followers at this time were called the Autonomists. The refusal of the PCI and the Christian Democrats to recognize this split, caused members of Autonomy to be accused of acts of terror that they in fact condemned. They were a true mass-movement comprised of students, the unemployed, and those living on the margins of society. They came into increasing conflict with the PCI as a result of the Historical Compromise that dictated that Italy must be governed by an institutionalized political agreement with the Christian Democrats. The test came in the spring of 1975 when members fought with fascists and police in Rome. The wave of violence spread to Milan where a young fascist was killed as well as members of the police force. Thousands of factory workers joined the students and the unemployed. The inner city was under siege. There were riots and demonstrations. In Turin, an armed guard killed a young Fiat worker.

The state concluded that its principal enemy was Autonomy. This network of alliances represented a new form of social organization that no longer accepted the political line of the PCI. They were not interested in seizing power. Sylvère Lotringer writes, “Opposed to work ethics and hierarchy as much as exclusive ideological rigidity, they invented their own forms of

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and actively participating in the murder of Aldo Moro, president of the Christian Democrats. Voice evidence suggested Negri made a threatening phone call on behalf of the Red Brigade. But this, along with many other accusations, was later dropped. He fled to France where for many years he taught alongside Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze.

- 4 Piperno is an Italian Communist. He was active in the 1968 movement and in 1969 took part in the demonstrations against Fiat in Turin. With Negri and Oreste Scalzone, he was charged in 1979 for the publication of subversive magazines but escaped arrest. In 1981 he was convicted to ten years imprisonment for participation in the kidnapping of Aldo Moro. Most of the charges were later dropped and the sentence reduced.
- 5 Scalzone is a Marxist intellectual and co-founder of the Autonomy movement with Negri and Piperno. In March 1968 his vertebral column was seriously injured by a desk thrown from a window by neo-fascists at a University in Rome. In 1979 he was arrested with Negri and Piperno and accused of plotting attacks to overthrow the government.

social “war-fair” — pranks, squats ... pirate radio, sign tinkering — extending the spirit of May ’68 over a broad social landscape. The State’s response was the legalization of police violence and the systematic use of arms in police confrontations. Furthermore, a law called legge reale was passed that allowed police to fire whenever the public order was threatened. Those in possession of defensive weapons would receive the severest jail sentences. This law was essentially directed against the youthful proletariat. The PCI would not openly denounce this policy of police violence so as not to endanger their relations with the Christian Democrats.

This was the bloodiest phase of the workers’ struggle. Many were killed in the streets if they did not halt at police barricades. Chance passersby were wounded or killed if they wandered into a demonstration. The casualties in the movement seemed endless. This law, inherited from the fascist period, was directly responsible for the rise in terrorism and the increase in militant organizations and clandestine armed warfare by a growing number of proletarian youth. Terrorism would become a major crisis for the movement in the mid-seventies.

As a result of the 1976 elections, the PCI had increased its voting strength but was not strong enough to substantiate a Leftist government. It needed the help of the Christian Democrats. Thus, the historical compromise ended up bolstering the weakening Christian Democratic party. For the Italian workers, this meant paying for the economic downturn that grew worse in the years between 1973 and 1976 due to the oil crisis. There were consumer restrictions and reduced spending. Living conditions worsened and there was growing distrust of unions. Unemployment reached staggering proportions in 1977, with close to two million people out of work.

An important phase in the movement occurred in the late seventies with the increase in unemployed workers that were educated in the universities. As Franco Berardi writes,

The cultural revolution of 1968, which upset forms of behavior, values, human relationships, sexual relationships, the re-

lationship to country and home, has ended by creating a social stratum that is recalcitrant before the notion of salaried work, fixed residence, and fixed position of work.

The feminist movement emerged, as did gay activist collectives. Free Radio created an uninterrupted flow of music and words that could be accessed in homes. There were experiments with collective forms of living. Communes were set up by squatters in various neighborhoods. All this was an attempt to transform society at the cultural level. But the enormous creativity of the movement of 1977 could not succeed in finding a program or a way of actualizing its ideals in the positive sense.

On March 7, the student movement took over Bologna, a stronghold of the PCI, and Rome. There was violent conflict in Rome. Five days later, Rome became the stage of a six-hour battle including thousands of youths. During the following days, the movement invaded the city of Bologna. The PCI's ability to maintain public order was undermined and the state resorted to brutal repression throughout Italy. Hundreds were arrested in Bologna and elsewhere, radio stations were closed, journals and magazines confiscated, bookstores shut down. Berardi writes,

Now one began to discover that social democracy, even though introducing new elements into the communist worker movement tradition of the Third International, was not necessarily in contradiction with totalitarian, violent and Stalinist trends. In fact, the two aspects were mixed in the PCI, which had become a component of bourgeoisie democracy by abandoning every type of violence against the existing order [while] at the same time [maintaining the] violent force of totalitarianism against the revolutionary movement.

It was clear that the movement was in crisis. As a collective, it could not reconcile its members' ideals with the growing violence and state repression. Armed warfare had begun to take center stage, eventually engulfing the entire movement.

The Red Brigade had grown from the workers' struggle in the early years of the seventies. This militant faction came from factories in Milan, Turin, and Genoa. At first, kidnapping of factory managers and acts of sabotage were linked with the workers' struggle. But soon, they would break with the movement and develop into an aggressive militant organization against the state. Their clandestine operations culminated with the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, President of the Christian Democrats.

The strength of terrorism was the symptom of a larger crisis within the movement, namely its inability to actualize a program for implementing its perspectives and ideals. The arrests of April 7, 1979 were a direct result of the State's desire to eradicate every attempt by the movement to supersede terrorism. Berardi writes, "Superseding terrorism meant creating a foundation for pacification and for the reconstruction of conditions needed for the class struggle. To pacify ... meant to remove the obstacles constituted by the more than one thousand political prisoners." About twenty people were arrested on suspicion of being "dangerous terrorists" including Negri, who was accused of being the "secret leader" of the Red Brigade. Balestrini himself was indicted and fled to France. It was no coincidence that the chief prosecutor, Pietro Calogero, was a member of the PCI. Those arrested were neither caught in the act nor found in possession of incriminating documents. The charges were serious and often carried a life sentence. According to CARI (New York Committee against Repression in Italy),

The deep crisis within the Italian political system enabled the leading parties [the CD and the PCI] to look for "scapegoats," thereby diverting attention from the real problems. The PCI after its Historical Compromise with Christian Democrats, was encountering increasing disillusionment within its rank and file. ... The PCI [had] willingly paraded itself as the main defender of law in order to gain respectability.

The accusations were based on the reports of defendants, taped conversations, and the word of informants. The possibility of a new epoch free from capitalist domination was becoming questionable: the state was attempting to close off any possible transition to an era of liberation, and arrests were not based on fact. Again, Berardi writes,

For in truth it is in that territory of the imagination that the real war is being fought. On one side of the battle is Dissuasion (the infinite power of the state, the all-seeing eye, the all-knowing brain, the all-imagining mind), on the other is Liberation of the creative energies of a proletariat whose intellectual potential is immense, but whose conditions of material existence are cramped and miserable. This is the real contradiction, the real war. ... The performance of April 7th has shown that the power structure can win the war today by invading the realm of the imagination.

The statement bears an unsettling similarity to what we read in the 9/11 Commission Report with regard to the accuracy of implementing strategic plans in times of war, "It is therefore crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination." This "institutionalizing" of the imagination was one instance among many attempts by the United States to silence any opposition to its official policy here and abroad.

The American struggles have always been a key point of reference in Italy. If anything, the importance of the Italian situation resided in its ability to extend the American struggle further because of the continuity of the class struggle in Italy. As Balestrini writes, "I am convinced today for the first time that our problem is really an American problem." The 1960s in America were a turbulent and creative time: a time of civil rights activism, healthcare reform, the rise of Black nationalism and the formation of the Black Panthers, the assassination of the staunch anti-communist John Kennedy, outrage here and abroad about the United States's heavy handed approach to Vietnam, the riots at the 1968 Democratic Convention and the reaction of the police,

the assassination of Martin Luther King, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Stonewall riots, and the rise of a counterculture movement against mainstream liberalism. The seventies were marked by the oil crisis in 1973 and the energy crisis in 1979, making it perhaps the worst decade in terms of economic performance since the Great Depression. It was a decade that witnessed the Kent State Massacre, the Watergate Scandal and the resignation of Richard Nixon, the burgeoning feminist movement, the creation of environmental groups, the launch of Skylab, the first U.S. space station, the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, and the blackout in New York. It marked the decline of the counterculture of the sixties and the consequent rise in conservative politics, signaling the end of a world of creativity and hope. The events of the sixties and seventies in the United States form a backdrop for Balestrini's *Blackout* and compliment the intricate weave of voices that is the poem's collective song.

### *Blackout*

The opening section of Balestrini's *Blackout* was compiled from a tourist guide of Monte Blanc. The poem begins, "in front of a landscape of immense beauty that opens onto the glaciers ... the view is incomparable in good weather but often obscured by fog." Space is unconfined by the "the immense silence of the dazzling glaciers." Nature is impersonal. The geographic names lose their local color and enter the realm of the mythical, the dreamlike. There is a sense of continuous expansion, "the gaze distinguishes the Oberland peaks on one side and the maritime Alps on the opposite." We are in the realm of limitless possibility. The effect is strengthened by the use of exceptional adjectives ("immense," "dazzling," "glittering" and "superb") and nouns ("vista" and "panorama"). Hyperbole dominates the opening section. In this way, the poem achieves its solemn and contemplative tone. Here in this open space we imagine the play of light. There is a sense of overwhelming brightness.

In the second section, the movement of the poem is away from the heavenly and toward the terrestrial: “for days a poster illuminated the walls of Milan.” But this vertical downward movement occurs with a sense of foreboding in the natural world, “a splendid sky” gives way to “threat of storm.” We are in the presence of life, the world of man. There is an explosion of color, “a river of blue jeans.” The mountain peaks have become walls. The scene changes from the Alps to a street in Milan. The valleys become the Arena of Milan where the memorial concert for Demetrio Stratos was held on June 14, 1979. We are fully in the throes of action and far away from the contemplative serenity of the poem’s opening lines. The poem zooms in to witness looters “in the Bronx inside an Ace Pontiac reception room” who “knock down a steel door take 50 new cars and start the motors simultaneously,” “a 50 year old woman with a shopping bag” entering “a store saying today she shops for free,” and on “111th street a crowd moves hurriedly amid the ruins of the supermarket like hundreds of ants carrying out the goods.” We hear “a young woman ... Afreeka Omfress,” who says, “it really is wonderful they are all out together on the streets there is a *party* atmosphere.” We are in New York during the blackout of 1977.

In section twenty of Balestrini’s poem, we read a fragment of Antonio Negri’s response to police questioning regarding the ability of the state to respond effectively to the demands of members of the movement: “in the first place the definitive fall of the state’s ability to mediate power by law.” The result of this is the increased struggle for power because for Negri: “the relationship has become a relationship of power.” Another significant event in the poem concerns the U.S. space station Skylab’s reentry into the atmosphere and the growing fear that it may strike a city. The poem enters a world of chaos, violence and uncertainty, from the silence and stillness of the glaciers to the conflict in the streets. The light has gone out.

Light alternates in the poem between natural and artificial. In the fourth part of the poem we encounter a destructive element of artificial light, “the 500 Watt bulbs were mounted at a dis-

tance of about 5 meters and aimed directly at the window of the cell." Here the light is the all-seeing eye of the State — Bentham's panopticon. It is the eye of Truth that persecutes: "you persecute your persecutors with the truth." The brilliant light becomes a cause for alienation and inhibition. Light becomes an instrument of torture. The prisoner is unable to sleep under the bright lights and "the sleep" that overtakes him, "during the day" is "systematically disrupted by the prison routine that began at 6am," "From the night of August 1st three floodlights illuminated my cell every day." The prisoner writes, "I was very nervous and unable to read I couldn't retain any thoughts for a long time nor reflect on my situation." The absence of artificial light is a blackout, "like at the cinema when the film ends." It is unlike the darkness that follows day and is a time of rest. The blackout is a time of alienation and destruction, rebellion and social protest.

*Blackout* is a collective lament that celebrates and welcomes the end of a myth. Blackout was to be a collective call to action, a choral song. Its subtitles referring to music point to its original conception as a performance piece. The poem revives an ancient lyric genre, the threnos, a public performance of lamentation. The poem opens with the memorial concert, for Demetrio Stratos, but also evokes the "celebratory" atmosphere among looters during the blackout in New York that recalls the clandestine activities of terrorist groups, particularly the Red Brigade. Hope has degenerated to violence and repression; the movement has failed to realize its program of liberation. The destruction of individual freedom through harmful and unhealthy work in the factories ("they are not thinking of the day they will leave Fiat // the work you do each day is boring and harmful"), the arrests of April 7 ("Doctor Pietro Calogero our substitute magistrate for the republic approves the actions of the penal procedure # 710 / 719 A"), the collective rituals where every kind of violence and destruction is unleashed in the name of apparent freedom. These are some of the many metaphors for death that circulate in the poem. Death is accompanied by images of loneliness and despair, and a desire to escape death. In part four, section forty-five we read of "a common fear of being alone," and in section

forty-three, that there is “so much anger.” In section forty-four, we read a phrase taken from a program note for the memorial concert for Demetrio Stratos: “this concert represents the desire not to give in to death.” The song of collective lamentation transcends personal grief.

Unlike a traditional epic that sings of origins in a fabulous manner because the bard is at a distance from the events, the language in *Blackout* is drawn primarily from news clippings. At the conclusion of the poem, Balestrini includes a list of the various magazine articles and books from which the poem’s phrases are taken. We also find a diagram illustrating Balestrini’s systematic organization and compositional rigor. The poem uses repetition to create a series of complex cross-references, and the method is the equivalent of a musical theme with variations. In the words of Pierre Boulez, “structural relationships are not defined once and for all, ... they organize themselves ... according to variable diagrams.” On each page, four phrases are repeated from the previous page. The iterations are not only of whole phrases, sometimes parts of phrases or extensions are added. The last phrase in part three, section thirty-two, reads “because we know almost everything we need to know.” The first phrase in section thirty-three reads “get to the point what does it mean to create impenetrable sanctuaries.” And the next line is “because we know almost everything we need to know and we don’t need lessons.” These phrases were taken from the prosecutors’ questioning of defendants arrested on April 7, 1979.

The following excerpts illustrate how parts of phrases appear along with their extensions:

Italian justice is not guilty (Section 33/line 8)  
 not guilty of foul play they say lightly and in bad faith  
 (34/10)  
 as those who really engage in foul play say lightly and in bad  
 faith (35/2)

a tiny fanatical elite supported by sleazy backers (33/4)

a tiny fanatical elite that attempt to exorcize their frustra-  
 tions supported by sleazy backers (34/2)  
 that attempt to exorcize their frustrations (35/6)

there won't therefore be a bit of wisdom other than much  
 caution behind the silence and obscurity of intellectuals  
 (34/6)

a bit of wisdom other than much caution behind the silence  
 and obscurity of intellectuals (35/4)  
 behind the silence and obscurity of intellectuals (36/2)

Of course, as the phrases change so do the relations between them and between other phrases in a section. In this way, Balestrini is able to create a patchwork of cross references and multiple voices. Gian Paolo Renello writes,

Resuming and modifying the definition of Boulez, [one can say that in Balestrini's *Blackout*] the series is the germ of a hierarchical classification based on a few properties, equipped with greater or lesser selectivity, which enables you to organize a finite set of creative possibilities with respect to a given character.

In "Blackout," Balestrini creates a framework for multiple voices, a secular cantata.

In opposition to the biblical *fiat lux*, a blackout is a sudden disappearance of the light. Initial surprise — "in front of a landscape of immense beauty" — yields to despair for a darkness that seems to engulf everything. Death involves everything and everyone. Language fails and gives way to primal terror, "there was a collective guttural cry when the lights went out." But light and dark are reciprocal. The luminous vision that opens the poem is reached through the experience of blackout in the form of violence and revolt. In the last section, the poem suggests a passage from the dark that closes the text and sanctions the end of a world, a movement indicated by the subtitles. At first there is

“a loss of memory or an event of fact” followed by “the extinguishing of all stage lights to end a play or scene,” “suppression censorship concealment etc.,” and finally “a *momentary* lapse of consciousness or vision [my emphasis].” Paolo Virno, who was arrested in June 1979 and a member of the Autonomist paper *Metropoli*, wrote,

The natural corporeal reality of [the] individual, his or her socially enriched senses, instead of constituting the tedious and superfluous empirical zone in which value is produced, suggests a different criterion of productivity, no longer based on the blind necessity of self-preservation or “time-saving,” but rather on the variegated time of consciously planning activities, ... which, after all, is what Marx alluded to when he spoke of the composer of music and the work of art as anticipations in terms of a form of production without domination.

In “Blackout,” the end of the ideals and hopes of the generation of ’68 is announced as an inevitable process and the conclusion of a cycle. But if the “lapse of vision” is “momentary,” then a new beginning is ever-present in the ashes of a failed utopia.

### Postscript: At the Cinema When the Film Ends

And so, the final credits have appeared on the screen. The film is over. There is silence. But suddenly we are conscious of others in the dark with us. The viewing of the film has been a collective experience. We stand up and head for the exit together. Outside there is light again. Perhaps sun or rain. We go our separate ways immersed in our own thoughts. But we are in the world again and anything is possible — if not collectively on a large scale then through individual choice, the choice to live according to one’s will and desire and without judgment of others. Balestrini’s *Blackout* is just such a call to action but not by way of traditional politics or worldview. The struggle, as the poem suggests, is not over, but continues under a different set of

historical circumstances and with different methods and strategies. Balestrini's provocation is urgently needed, especially here in the United States where it is increasingly evident that people are encouraged to act like the "automaton" the poem speaks of, who "faithfully follows orders," "who has no personality," and is "only an arm driven by a mind that is foreign." It is at once a subversive primary document of a bygone revolutionary period, and an explosive poem rich in implications for our present time and for the future.

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## Artaud's Sacred Triad

### A Qabalistic Analysis of a Certain Passage in a Letter to André Breton

In this essay, I will use some of the attributions to the Hermetic Qabalah devised by Aleister Crowley to analyze a passage from Artaud's letter to André Breton, written in Paris on June 2, 1946. It is unknown whether or not Artaud had any contact with Crowley's writings or whether he or Crowley were even aware of each other. Either case is probably unlikely. But what cannot be disputed is that Artaud was fully aware and often skeptical, if not furious, about the many aspects of a hermetic tradition that included Tarot, Qabalah, and Eastern mysticism. In fact, we have a late letter to Jacques Prevel from Ivry-sur-Seine, dated June 4, 1947, where Artaud speaks explicitly about the Qabalah, and rejects what he sees as a "cock-and-ball stew ... [a] larva coming out all over in an angry rash of the rejected angels of the mind." He writes,

These rejects never made it as angels and never were a mind. If God is above all innumerable and unfathomable, and nobody ever could or did have God's number, then why not cease and desist from incessantly measuring and enumerating all these shadows of non-being into which, according to

the Kabbala, he is in the process of withdrawing, beyond any possible return or recourse, from innumerable numbers of creation.

And yet there is a word, “sacrosanct” (or “supra-reality”) that comes up in the late letters written between 1945 and 1947. It is a curious word in light of these pronouncements and many others, in these letters, which reject the idea of God. Is this a Catholic residue that haunts Artaud’s investigations into religion and the nature of being? Indeed, his obsession with the mysteries of God and the problem of being has something of the “defrocked priest” about it. Whatever the case, the Hermetic Qabalah created by Aleister Crowley is a skeptical one, and nothing about its mystical function or practical importance is taken for granted. Crowley writes, “We do not believe in any supernatural explanations, but insist that this source may be reached by the following out of definite rules, the degree of success depending upon the capacity of the seeker, and not upon the favour of any Divine Being.” Crowley’s system accords the body a central position in the discussion of mysticism and magick, that is he creates a link between sexuality and spirituality; the sacred and the profane are not considered as separate. For this reason, its use here is appropriate. I believe it can be used to elucidate some aspects of Artaud’s preoccupations with magic and, more importantly, its connection to sexuality.

The essential practices among the many occult orders, including the *Ordo Templi Orientis* (O.T.O.)—the lodge that Aleister Crowley joined in 1910 that employs his Thelemic system of initiation—is a training of the consciousness to specific ends. Crowley writes that the function of meditation is “the restraining of the mind to a single act, state, or thought.” In the O.T.O., for example, there is the daily adoration of the sun, Liber Resh; there is yoga, meditation and rituals such as The Mass of the Phoenix, all aimed at the discipline of the mind and the body. And the importance of this with regard to sexuality is known in the many occult traditions in the East. In their book,

*Awake Kundalini*, Rajnikant Upadhyaya and Gopal Sharma, quoting Swami Sivananda write, "The Yogi who draws his semen up and preserves it, conquers death."<sup>1</sup>

In this letter Artaud writes that the training of the consciousness with respect to "sexuality" is a means of creating states of "near eternal overcoming" of the base materialism of the world. The ultimate project of Artaud was the theft of Promethean fire — the creative "sexual" function of God, to assert the preeminence, rather, of man as deity, creator, and supreme ruler of all things spiritual. It is in training the "orgasm," the source of the creative sexual energy so central, for example, to Egyptian cosmologies, that one is able to retain power over the "infernal swamp" of spiritual emptiness, "the slime of Khem set up in the Gates of Amennti." It is important to note that Artaud speaks elsewhere of the "sacrosanct consciousness" and that he means something very different than the idea of the sacred that was inherited from the Abrahamic religions and in fact perpetuated in such systems as Qabalah as it is traditionally known.

For Crowley, Eros is holy and the world of the senses, the crude manifestations of Assiah, the lowest kingdom of Malkuth, are to be alchemically transformed by the initiate into Kether, the crown. In one sense this does not mean "ascending" from Malkuth to Kether since on the Qabalah the tree of heaven grows downward like a flaming sword. Furthermore, when we look up at the stars, we are not really looking up at all but down within ourselves. There is no difference between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Kether is in Malkuth. Malkuth is in Kether.

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1 Crowley writes, in the key text for the O.T.O. IX degree rite, *De Arte Magica*, which is included in Francis King's *The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O.*, "Like the Jews, the wise men of India have a belief that a certain particular Prana, or force, resides in the Bindu, or semen. . . . Therefore they stimulate to the maximum its generation by causing a consecrated prostitute to excite the organs, and at the same time vigorously withhold by will. After some little exercise they claim that they can deflower as many as eighty virgins in a night without losing a single drop of the Bindu. Nor is this ever to be lost, but reabsorbed through the tissues of the body. The organs thus act as a siphon to draw constantly fresh supplies of life from the cosmic reservoir, and flood the body with their fructifying virtue."

Man is God. Artaud imagines himself as a kind of furious Christ who suffered on the cross against his will. He writes in a letter to Henri Parisot from Rodez, December 6, 1945:

In any event, the police and the rabbis of the time decided one day to get rid of me and arrested me at night in a garden of olive trees where I slept under the stars, not having a roof to shelter me. I went to trial, but although I was recognized as innocent of any crime by a certain Pontius Pilate, the people, filled with imbecility, *rose up* to demand that I be crucified.<sup>2</sup>

And, like Christ, he rises from the dead, furious,

I was so horrified at my own state and at all things that a shiver of fury overtook me, an earthquake which made me overturn everything, and all of us fought for more than a day in Judea.

It also bears noting, in the context of Artaud's letters, that the lower world, Assiah, is where the spirits dwell, those beings that ceaselessly harass Artaud.

In the letter to Breton, Artaud writes,

There is nothing indeed, André Breton, like coital orgasms when they are methodically pushed to the limit to train the consciousness in certain states of near eternal overcoming of things to which, I think, this line of Villon may correspond (the ancient verse)

*Empress of the infernal swamps.*

Artaud writes that this "near eternal overcoming of things" corresponds the verse of Villon, "*Empress of the infernal swamps.*" Perhaps in choosing this quote Artaud was thinking of The

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all the excerpts are from *Succubations & Incubations: Selected Letters of Antonin Artaud (1945-1947)* published by Infinity Land Press and translated by Peter Valente and Cole Heinowitz.

Empress tarot on the Qabbalistic tree of life whose path is between the two Sephiroth, Understanding (Binah) and Wisdom (Chokmah). This path forms the base or foundation of the uppermost triad whose pinnacle is Kether, the crown. While the triads below point downwards and form the sign of water the single uppermost triad above the abyss, the "Supernal Triad," forms the sign of fire. Furthermore, the path connecting Binah to Chokmah is a bridge that connects both fire and water above the abyss that is represented by the "false" Sephira, Daath. The Hebrew word associated with this path means "door." This is the door that connects the microcosm to the macrocosm and asserts the original unity of man as God in the dissolution of duality.

Artaud writes, "it is in this way and *not* another, André Breton, that the masses of which you speak dominate us" and "that is to say by the sinister way of their longing for ass." Here we are in the lower world, Malkuth, the world of the senses, sexuality understood as bodily function. But Artaud continues, "Ass, I mean sexuality, is useful, André Breton, I'm not saying the opposite; it is an excellent means of expansion, emission, and I would dare say *propulsion*. But that is not all." Sexual magick is perhaps the highest and most difficult practice in magick, but it is easy to see, for example, the ways in which sexuality can be used magically in common practice. I am thinking of the use of glamour as a seductive tool in Anton LaVey's *The Satanic Witch*. But more importantly, Artaud believes sexuality can be a means of *propulsion*. Crowley writes, "love is always bold, virile, ecstatic, even orgiastic. . . . Mighty and terrible and glorious as it is, however, it is but the pennon upon the sacred lance of Will."<sup>3</sup> Sex is the "Ecstasy" that is shaped "like a spear" that "pierces the ancient dragon that sat upon the stagnant waters." While Artaud recognizes sexuality's propulsive force, he is also aware

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3 Message from Master Therion (Aleister Crowley), *Constitution of the Ancient Order of Oriental Templars (O.T.O)* (1917), in R. Swinburne Clymer, *The Rosicrucian Fraternity in America: Authentic and Spurious Organizations* (The Rosicrucian Foundation, Quakertown, n.d.), 2:600, [http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeV/Unleashing\\_the\\_Beast.htm](http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeV/Unleashing_the_Beast.htm)

of its ability to enslave the consciousness. The masses, Artaud writes, dominate us by a “sinister longing for ass.”

We must pause for a moment before we can continue in order to examine the meanings of certain numbers in the following passage by Artaud where he is speaking of a “destruction by fire”:

BECAUSE, ON THE THIRD OF JUNE, 1937, THE FIVE SERPENTS APPEARED, WHO WERE ALREADY IN THE SWORD WHOSE STRENGTH OF DECISION IS REPRESENTED BY A STAFF!

What does this mean?

It means that I who am speaking have a Sword and a Staff.

A staff with 13 knots, and this staff bears on the ninth knot the magic sign of the thunderbolt; and 9 is the number of destruction by fire and

I FORESEE A DESTRUCTION

BY FIRE

The number 13 is very significant in Crowley’s Qabalistic symbolism. The Hebrew words for “love” (*Ahava* — אהבה) and “one/unity” (*Echad* — אחד) all have the numerical value of 13. If you add 13 to 13 you get 26 whose attribution on the Tarot is the Devil. The Hebrew letter for “eye” (*Ayin* — ע) is also connected to this card. In Crowley’s system this is Lucifer, the light-bringer who opens the eyes of the blind and those chained by dogma and law.

The number 9 is important for Artaud since it indicates “destruction by fire.” The 9th letter of the Hebrew alphabet is *Teth* — ט. Its numerical value is 9. In the Qabalah, the number represents the ninth Sefirah, *Yesod* — יסוד (whose meaning in the Arcanum is “sex”). The word also means “foundation.” It is also an elemental letter that symbolizes the serpent. The “five serpents” Artaud is speaking of could be the five serpents of the Book of Revelation who were followers of Apophis, an Egyptian demon. *Teth* — ט also appears in the Torah in the word *tov* of Genesis 1:4, meaning beneficial. Artaud is speaking of a fire that

destroys the created a (false) world at the very foundation. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, *toṽ* is the word in the Torah used to describe the Hidden or Primordial Light. Artaud's search for this Primordial Light led him to a rejection of the normative sexuality of the lower world.

Artaud's work can be seen as a vast exorcism in which sexuality forms an integral part. Artaud uses images of rape, masturbation, and fornication to demystify their control over the body and the mind. Indeed, language itself, that "terrible violence of wording," that "violence with the rigor of poetic tone," is performed, as above, with a kind of ecstasy (think of the "theatricality" of cruelty) that is solar and phallic. Artaud concludes, "In any case it is not, according to fact, a means of divination, much less of *domination*," and

whoever surrenders to the ass, I mean to that assylum, to that seminal inflation of the paunch which during orgasm acquires a super-brain, does not gain from that ascent, in abjection, enough to dominate my seminal containment, mine, Antonin Artaud.

For Artaud, "sexuality" is not a means of divination or domination since each case would presuppose the intervention of a higher entity. Artaud is against the idea of God as a higher being distant or distinct from man, a conception that Western civilization has propagated in the form of Judeo-Christian monotheism. It is this idea of a higher power or authority that leads to the "domination" of that mass of people who congregate in worship of a single God. It is interesting to note that in Crowley's system the idea of a suffering Christ "rising from the dead" is based on the old Osiris worldview of the dying god and thus this view is corrupt. In Artaud's view Christ was reborn in abjection because he was crucified, thus man has nothing to gain from the resurrection. As we've seen, Artaud embodies this abjection as a furious Christ in his letters so as to deflate the idea of a superior being and to place man in his physical agony above the spirit. He writes to Henri Parisot from Rodez on December 6, 1945,

... feeling my hands pierced and leaking with blood, the putrid stench of my body, and my face dried up with shit on my surviving corpse ...

Whoever surrenders to the *ass* surrenders to the *ass*-ylum, the gross materialism of the Assaitic world that is like a prison of illusion, indeed like an *asylum*. During the orgasm, the inflated paunch, or pregnant belly, creates a “super-brain.” In the Qabalalah, this is Ruach, where one identifies the self with the intellect, which is limited.

Artaud equates sexuality with reproduction. Sexuality as reproduction has no control over Artaud. For him it is born of the same bodily abjection, since the proliferation of beings leads to the loss of the primordial unity, that which Crowley writes is the “secret of the Sphinx” that no man will understand who is not, “pure and voluptuous ... chaste and obscene ... androgyne and gynander.” This also suggests Artaud’s disgust with the way humanity has progressed and his belief that any further birth would be an attack on his own life. In the lower world, Malkuth, the energies of the “object” earth rule the body that engages in sexual acts. One is trapped and bound in the abjection of the lower world. It is here that Artaud witnesses men laughing at him and masturbating in front of him to bar his passage to an alternate world, the “supra-reality” or “sacrosanct consciousness.”

Artaud writes that whoever surrenders to sexuality does not gain enough to “dominate my seminal containment, mine, Antonin Artaud.” Artaud’s “seminal containment” is an assertion of the absolute body, the body he conceives of as being without organs, the autonomous body not born of mother and father, thus free from the burden of generation yet in possession of a far more powerful magic.

The power of Artaud’s magic can be clarified if we examine his view of sexuality more closely and use Crowley’s discussion of witchcraft, a special case in his formula for the creative function, that is, sexuality, to further clarify the matter. In *Art and Death* (1925–27) Artaud writes, speaking of Abelard, “What a beautiful eunuch.” In his essay, “Lacan with Artaud,” Lorenzo

Chiesa writes, "Castration is an attractive imaginary lure, the mirage of a *re-conquered unity* [my emphasis], which accompanies him from the self-identification with Abelard." Artaud proposes a kind of Dionysian castration. In *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*, Artaud writes,

By having him undergo once more but for the last time an  
 autopsy  
 in order to remake his anatomy.  
 I say, in order to remake his anatomy.  
 Man is sick because he is badly constructed.  
 We must decide to strip him in order to scratch out this  
 animalcule  
 which makes him itch to death,

god,  
 and with god  
 his organs,

For tie me down if you want to,  
 but there is nothing more useless than an organ.

When you have given him a body without organs,  
 then you will have delivered him from all his automatisms  
 and restored  
 him to his true liberty.

Then you will teach him again to dance inside out  
 as in the *delirium* [my emphasis] of dance halls  
 and inside out will be his true side out. [As above so below,  
 as within so without. The duality of microcosm/macro-  
 cosm no longer exists.]

Furthermore, Chiesa writes, "Virility [for Artaud] lies in asceticism and love between man and woman has to remain platonic. ... Organic generation and the phallic *jouissance* it entails are for Artaud, *a priori*, a synonym of the de-generation insofar as

they follow the loss of a primordial unity.”<sup>4</sup> One recalls Artaud’s insistence that he was not born of a father or mother but like a god generated by his own will. Artaud writes in a letter to Marthe Robert from Espalion, March 29, 1946:

There is a mystery in my life, Marthe Robert, whose basis is that I was not born in Marseilles on the 4th of September 1896, but that I passed by there that day, from elsewhere, because in reality I was never born and in truth I cannot die.

In the passage above Artaud is describing the qualities of a god who dwells “elsewhere” and “cannot die” because he is “unborn.”

Crowley writes that witchcraft is “restricted to the use of such women as are no longer women in the magical sense of the word, because they are no longer capable of corresponding to the formula of the male, and are therefore neuter rather than feminine.” As an example, he speaks of the masculine, “Amazon type” woman. Furthermore, Crowley writes, “I am hard and strong and male but come Thou! I shall be soft and weak and feminine.” The body without organs is also neuter with regard to sexuality. This body can only create through destruction. But Crowley writes that the effect of a specific use of this magical power:

consecrate[s] the Magician who performs it in a very special way. ... The great merits of this formula are that it avoids contact with the inferior planes, that it is self-sufficient, that it involves no responsibilities, and that it leaves its masters

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4 In a letter to Anie Besnard, written in Paris on February 16, 1947, Artaud writes, “There are people in Paris and elsewhere eminently interested that our former bonds of friendship, affection, and even *love*, never be resumed. / Yet those bonds of love were truly innocent. / But it is their very innocence that afflicts the world. A heart, yours, faithful to me without having had sexual relations with me, this is not to be found anymore in the world, Anie. To love someone with a pure love, without any bodily contact, and that this love be based on honor and to devote oneself and to do good, to serve and to help another to live without expecting anything in return but an identical attachment.”

not only stronger in themselves, but wholly free to fulfill their essential Natures.

Furthermore, Crowley speaks here of the Mercurial “Virgin” and the “Hanged Man”<sup>5</sup> and states that in this special use of magic “the creative force is employed deliberately for destruction, and is entirely absorbed in its own sphere of action” as is the absolute body of Artaud, impenetrable and autonomous. Nevertheless, this work is regarded as holy. Artaud writes,

A natural force altered by woman will free itself against and by woman. This force is a death-force.

IT HAS THE DARK RAPACIOUSNESS OF THE GENITAL. IT IS PROVOKED BY WOMAN BUT MAN DIRECTS IT. THE MUTILATED FEMININITY OF MAN, THE ENCHAINED TENDERNESS OF MEN THAT WOMAN HAD STAMPED ON HAVE REVIVED A VIRGIN ON THAT DAY. BUT IT WAS A VIRGIN WITHOUT BODY, WITHOUT SEX, ONE WHICH ONLY THE MIND CAN PROFIT BY.

There also exists a connection between the Hebrew word, *Ayin* (eye), and non-reproductive hence “destructive” sexuality. In the Arcanum, the “eye” can refer to the anus and thus to homosexual sex.<sup>6</sup> But it can also refer to the phallus. In *The Book of Lies* Crowley writes:

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- 5 The actual meaning of the word, ALIM, may be taken as indicating the formula. *Aleph* may be referred to Harpocrates. *Lamed* may imply the exaltation of Saturn and suggest the “Three of Swords” in a particular manner. Yod will then recall Hermes, and *mem* “The Hanged Man.” We have thus a Tetragrammaton which contains no feminine component. The initial force is here the Holy Spirit and its vehicle or weapon the “Sword and Balances.” Justice is then done upon the Mercurial “Virgin,” with the result that the Man is “Hanged” or extended and is slain in this manner. Such an operation makes creation impossible. The virgin is hung and slain. This is Artaud’s castrated body, a “body without organs,” non-generative, and “destructive.” Artaud writes in his *Diagram of Horoscope of June 15, 1937—on the Tortured Man*, “I also preach total Destruction, but Conscious and Rebellious Destruction.”
- 6 In *Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O.* Peter Koenig writes: “Crowley’s VIIIth degree unveiled . . . that masturbating on a sigil of a demon or meditating

Shiva, the Destroyer, is asleep, and when he opens his eye the universe is destroyed. ... But the “eye” of Shiva is also his Lingam [phallus]. Shiva is himself the Mahalingam, which unites these symbolisms. The opening of the eye, the ejaculation of the Lingam, the destruction of the universe, the accomplishment of the Great Work — all these are different ways of saying the same thing.

This is not a Genesis story. It reverses the act of creation. Through the inversion of the sexual act there is a movement toward primordial unity. This is through the destruction of the duality that came into being with the created universe.

This non-creative power that “destroys” does give birth yet in a very particular way. In the *The Vision and the Voice*, Crowley writes:

This is the great idea of magicians in all times — to obtain a Messiah by some adaptation of the sexual process. In Assyria they tried incest. ... Greeks and Syrians mostly bestiality. ... The Mohammedans tried homosexuality; medieval philosophers tried to produce homunculi by making chemical experiments with semen. But the root idea is that *any form of procreation other than normal* [my emphasis] is likely to produce results of a magical character.

Here are Artaud’s “daughters of the heart to be born”; unborn because virtual, essential, limitless — magical. In *The Screaming Body*, Stephen Barber speaks about this image, says they were

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upon the image of a phallus would bring power or communication with a divine being. ... The IXth degree was labeled heterosexual intercourse where the sexual secrets were sucked out of the vagina and when not consumed ... put on a sigil to attract this or that demon to fulfill the pertinent wish. ... In the XIth degree, the mostly homosexual degree, one identifies oneself with an ejaculating penis. The blood (or excrements) from anal intercourse attract the spirits/demons while the sperm keeps them alive.”

a group of warrior girls whom Artaud in the isolation and sterility of his internment, had elaborated as the embodiment of his desired liberation. He named them his “daughters of the heart to be born.” This fantasy included women Artaud knew and admired as well as his grandmothers who “were genealogically inverted, to become feral, erotic children ready to battle for Artaud’s release.

Here is the connection between Inversion (ascetic, non-generative, “destructive”), the Feral (Luciferian destruction by fire), and the Body reborn (ecstatic castration, the re-construction of the body). This is Artaud’s Sacred Triad.

Artaud concludes his letter to Breton by stating the essential problem of existence: “The Hindus say that this world is an illusion and that we are a part of it and that we must leave it to discover reality.” For Artaud, this world, that is, the kingdom of Malkuth, is illusory, dominated by vile spirit magic. He writes, “The human consciousness is not clean.” We are part of the illusion and “the true anatomy of being is not the one that is taught and dissected on the anatomic tables, but that of a negligible skeleton dead at the bottom of some of us.” The “dead” body must be re-vitalized and transformed into the true magical anatomy, a kind of astral body without organs, un-generative, autonomous and above all, impenetrable.

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VII

REVISITING THE ANCIENT  
WORLD IN THE  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY



## This Is Not a Golden Age

### 1. A Balance between the Public Persona and the Private Life<sup>1</sup>

Pliny the Younger was born into an aristocratic family and rose through many imperial and civil offices, finally serving as the imperial magistrate under the emperor Trajan. He spends hours in his study carefully constructing his image for posterity, in a series of letters that have since become famous. Now as he looks up from the page and gazes over the ruined city, and from his study, he sees the common people, unemployed and starving in the streets of Rome. He thinks, “There is so much suffering in the world.” He bows his head and begins to write again. He is writing to his friend, the historian Tacitus, who is hard at work on a history of Rome,

Perhaps you think I’m being contradictory. Not at all. Exercise fires up the imagination. Also, the countryside is pleasing to the eyes and so too the silence that one notices being so far away from the city. These things put me in a meditative mood. Therefore, my dear skeptic, let me advise you to take, when you’re hunting, not only your basket and a bottle of wine but also your writing implements. You’ll find that Minerva frequents the hills and forests as much as Diana.

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<sup>1</sup> All the following translations are my own.

Pliny spends his mornings hunting, a typical occupation of the upper classes, but also finds time to write letters to a young man just entering his first year at the University, where he speaks of the “contemplative life,” suggests certain authors to read, and emphasizes the importance of translation. He prefers staying at home in his study, rather than attending the games. He writes to his friend, Calvisius,

You will ask: How can that be here in the center of Rome with all the noise? The answer, dear friend, is simple: The Cirsensian Games were being held and I have no interest whatever in that kind of sport. There is nothing new, no variety; it is not something you would want to see more than once. I cannot image why thousands of grown men are possessed again and again by this infantile passion to watch galloping horses and men standing upright in their chariots.

He thinks of the death of his friend Larcus and wants to relate the incident in a letter to Acilius. He began this afternoon, writing,

The recent shocking brutality that the slaves of Larcus Macedo, a man of Praetorian rank, exhibited upon their master is profoundly tragic and deserves to be the subject of a far more substantial analysis than a private letter can provide.

He deplores the fact that Macedo, though an arrogant master, suffered a brutal attack by his slaves that caused his death. He thinks the revolution is just around the corner, and the rabble must be squashed if they pose a threat to his privileged class. Pliny knows that men like himself have much to fear in these uncertain times.

Except for the love of his young wife, Calpurina, to whom he writes an adoring letter, the nights would be unbearable, the days endless, the constant negotiations and responsibilities of

his position as Magistrate, crushing. Before he retires for the night, he writes this letter to her aunt,

You revered my mother as your own and it was you who shaped and encouraged my character from infancy, thus it is no mystery that I should have become the kind of man my wife is in love with. Know then that we both thank you for giving us to each other and that you chose one for the other.

And then he lies down in bed and tries to sleep.

We do not know much about his old age though it is thought that he died suddenly around 113 CE, during his appointment in Bithynia Pontus, a province of the Roman Empire on the Black Sea coast of Anatolia (Turkey), since nothing in his letters refers to later than that date.

## 2. The Wild Boys Arrive

But outside, the wild boys begin to have their say. They are responding to the worldview of Pliny the Younger.

## 3. Catullus and His Friends: Let the Games Begin!

Catullus, in his room, wipes the tears from his eyes, and thinks, “Lesbia is at it again!” He will have his revenge on this whole stinking Roman world. He was born into a wealthy family of Verona, around 82 BCE but was a punk rocker of the Latin world. Yet all the other poets knew he had a heart of gold and was, above all, a great poet. He writes, thinking of Clodia, the famous “Lesbia,”

My woman says she doesn't want to marry anyone but me,  
not even if Jupiter seeks her out. But I don't trust her.  
It's an old story: the things a woman says to an eager lover  
should be written on the wind or on running water

Then he crumples up the page and tosses it into the gutter. He thinks of Juventius, his one-time boyfriend, who was born into a rich family. Once when he was upset, he told Aurelius, "When you're randy, I know you'll fuck anything! / But I ask you, please keep away from my boy-friend, Juventius." But it was no use. Juventius consistently frustrated his love. As a matter of fact, he mailed this letter just the other day:

Couldn't you have found, Juventius, among all those pretty men in all the gay bars,  
any man other than this one from the sickly region of Pisaurum,  
who's yellower than that gilded statue of Caesar,  
and whom you, to top it off, actually like and dare to prefer over me,  
completely unaware of the offense you're committing!

He goes to the Roman baths where he meets Veranius. He can be gentle with Veranius, whom he affectionately calls "Veran." He remembers taking him into his home after his long travels, and listening to his stories, desiring to "kiss your mouth, your sweet eyes." He is happy in the company of his friend.

Later at night walking on the streets of Rome, he thinks about the corruption of politicians,

What is it Catullus? Why do you think death is the only answer?  
Like a pus-filled wart, Nonius sits his fat ass in the magistrate's chair.  
He swears by that lying snake, Vatinius, that he has a right to the consulship.  
What is it Catullus? Why do you think death is the only answer?

He is suddenly depressed. But then he thinks of Ipsitilla, the prostitute that "Veran" procured for him. He smiles and says to

himself “nine quick fucks in a row. She really was a live wire!” And then he thinks of that pig Aurelius and of how he tried to sleep with his boy. He was glad he told him, “Why don’t you just jerk off while you have the chance and not risk trying anything because I promise you’ll end up with a cock in your mouth.” That shut him up.

#### 4. The Search for Pleasure without Love

Meanwhile Ovid, in another part of town, is giving advice to a young man who suffered from an ugly divorce and is heartbroken. He tells the young man of his new work, *The Cures for Love*, and gives him a free copy. It is inscribed with the words, “seek sexual pleasure without love and that will rid you of thoughts of your ex.” Later critics would say of Ovid’s two volumes, *The Art of Love* and *The Cures for Love*, that they were

immensely popular in their time and have exerted a wide influence on European civilization. Chaucer was not the only poet who read Ovid’s love poems, so did almost every educated person with any interest in the subject. His wit and humor was often lost among medieval scholars who recast his themes in terms of “courtly love”, an idea that would have seemed ridiculous to Ovid.

His women are often “found on the street,” and in one poem he speaks of a “prostitute in Rome,” in other words, not a lady in an ivory tower. He repeatedly speaks of love (or, rather, sex) as a strategic game where the stakes are very high and the loser often suffers greatly. His “cures” are exactly that, poems that attempt to remedy the pain of love.

Who knows what Ovid would have thought of this. Could he have imagined that Lempriere’s Classical Dictionary, in the eighteenth century, would print this amusing description of *The Cures for Love* and its companion volume:

... the doctrine which they hold forth is dangerous, and, as the composition of an experienced libertine and refined sensualist, they are to be read with caution, as they seem to be calculated to corrupt the heart, and sap the foundations of virtue and morality.

It is true he did tell lovers to avoid their partners, not to engage in magic, to spy on their lover in the bathroom, to have multiple partners and to never be jealous.

Now, in exile, he thinks of Circe's speech to Ulysses, when she tried to lure him into staying with her on the island:

Though I thought at first I'd make a good candidate for your wife,  
 being a goddess and a daughter of the Sun, I no longer think so.  
 But please stay with me awhile. Do me this tiny favor and you will satisfy my prayers. Look, Poseidon must be very angry:  
 the waves are rising and this furious wind indicates there's a storm coming.  
 Please stay until the sea is calm and the storm has passed. If you sail now, I fear that your life will be in danger. And there is no reason to go. No new Troy arises, calling its men to arms and challenging your authority. But here your strength will not be wasted.  
 I know that you can govern the land with justice, peace, and love  
 and ensure safety for all my people.  
 I alone suffer from having loved you too much.

Though critical of her at one time, in his *Cures for Love*, now, an older man, he finds himself moved by her words, and so far from home, destined to die alone in exile, he begins to weep.

## 5. Hail Priapus!

Elsewhere, now that it is evening, various poets are arriving at the home of Maecenas, Horace's wealthy patron, for a night of drink and merriment. They prefer to remain anonymous. When they all arrive, they greet each other with a secret handshake and take their seats. Maecenas himself stands up at this point and closes the front door for the night and the historical record vanishes into oblivion. Nothing else is known of the poets who gathered there. When future histories were written, it was claimed that Virgil attended these secret meetings or that Ovid was the sole author of the writings that were produced there. But it is unlikely that either is the case. Later historians would write,

What remains, and was compiled under the name the Priapeia are a collection of bawdy epigrams in Latin found on statues of the god, Priapus. They were often carved into a tree-trunk fashioned in the shape of the god, with a huge phallus extending from the middle. The statues were placed in the garden of wealthy Romans to promote fertility, the phallus itself also acting as a weapon against thieves.

Historians think that the following was written by Catullus, or someone perhaps using that name as an alias. In any case it sounds like something he could have said near the end of a long life of sexual debauchery, and drink:

You Roman bitches suck my cock the whole night long,  
 slurping and spitting and expanding and contracting your  
 cheeks  
 and playing with your cunt til you're so hot  
 you lop off my prick with your teeth!  
 You're more lecherous than the sparrows that fuck to the  
 death!  
 Or you rupture my ass with your strap-ons!  
 I'm a tired, jaded, skinny and pale aesthete

who was once healthy  
 and could ram my dick in the ass of any boy I wanted!  
 Now I feel weak, nauseous  
 all my strength is kaput!  
 And I spit up  
 this ugly thick green mush  
 every morning as I wake up.

Historians also note that the first translation in 1890 by Leonard C. Smithers and Sir Richard Burton, was produced for private circulation and limited to an edition of five hundred copies.

## 6. The Cynic

Lucian, the old cynic, in his own way, belongs in the company of these men. His *The Dialogues of the Dead*, ridicules pomp and glory and the vanity of life, favoring instead a simple contemplative life based on acceptance of reality. For him, self-reliance and plain speech provide a more solid foundation on which to build a life that is truly free and governed by wise decisions. At this moment, Lucian is writing an essay for a local paper. He begins,

The Cynics, Diogenes and Mennipus, were the chief mouth-pieces for my satire and critique of the time. The word “Cynic” is derived from the Greek word meaning “dog-like.” In the words of Diogenes, “other dogs bite their enemies, I bite my friends to save them.” Cynicism was an ancient school of Greek society based on the idea that man, guided by reason, could achieve happiness by living in a way that was natural for humans and rejecting all conventional desires for power, wealth, sex, and fame, to pursue instead a simple life free from all possessions. Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412–323 BCE) took the principles of Cynicism to the extreme by falsifying coinage, sleeping in a tub, and eating raw meat, all in defiance of conventional values.

In his old age, he muses on the irrationality of desire. He thinks of dialogue seven which concerns this. In it, Tantalus tells Menippus, “But you see my punishment is subtle: I am given the desire to drink continually even though I am not thirsty!” Menippus tells him this is nonsense. He continues,

MENNIPUS And yet, come to think of it, you do need a drink. Some hellebore would do you a world of good! You’re suffering from a converse hydrophobia: you don’t fear water but you’re afraid of being thirsty.

TANTALUS Look I’d drink anything if I could. Give me hellebore or hemlock and quench my thirst along with my life!

MENNIPUS There you go again. Anyway, don’t be afraid, Tantalus. Neither you nor any ghost will ever drink anything. I promise you it’s impossible. But thank Pluto we all don’t have to suffer from a continual thirst like you do, with the water running away from us as we try to take a sip.

Lucian thinks,

In this dialogue the essence of my critique is that desire is not rational and often we are drawn to those very things that go against our natural tendencies. I spoke of wisdom, self-reliance, plain speech and freedom, as against the arguments of philosophers.

He is the elder statesman of the underground, a Burroughsian figure, a skeptic not easily persuaded to veer from his hard-won beliefs. He is critical of the spiritual life and does not believe in the value of myth.

Possessed of a furious thought, Lucian begins to write, and slowly his lips part in a devious smile.

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## The Epigrams of Callimachus

### Exercises for the Mind and the Heart

Callimachus was born in the Greek colony of Cyrene (now Shaḥḥāt, Libya) c. 310/305 BCE and died c. 240 BCE.<sup>1</sup> He was an important poet, critic, and scholar at the Library of Alexandria and enjoyed the patronage of the Egyptian-Greek pharaohs Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Ptolemy III Eurgetes. Callimachus is one of the lesser known poets today from the Classical world, compared to Catullus, Virgil, Ovid, Sappho, or Propertius, who benefit, on an almost yearly basis, from new translations and scholarly interpretations. But Callimachus should be better known. In the classical world, Catullus translated him, Propertius admired his work so much that he styled himself the “Roman Callimachus,” and Quintilian regarded him as chief among the elegiac poets. Ezra Pound would write, in his *Homage to Sextus Propertius* I, “Shades of Callimachus, Coan ghosts of Philetas / It is in your grove I would walk.” Cavafy was also influenced by the epigrams of Callimachus.

His chief influence from ancient Greek literature was the epigram. The earliest Greek epigrams were actually epitaphs. This type of epigram is recalled in the poems Cavafy wrote in the

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1 All the following translations of Callimachus’s Epigrams are my own.

guise of epitaphs for fictional Alexandrians. The most famous epigrammatist was Callimachus, who worked in Alexandria during the third century BCE. The epigrams of Callimachus and other Hellenistic poets helped Cavafy develop his characteristically brief, laconic poems, sometimes with an unexpected twist at the end. The entry for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* states:

Discoveries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of ancient Egyptian papyruses confirm the fame and popularity of Callimachus. No other Greek poet except Homer is so often quoted by the grammarians of late antiquity.

Fashions come and go in poetry as in everything else and Callimachus is often passed over in favor of the “canon.” The lack of attention on his work is regrettable and yet his epigrams, for which he is best known, are in my estimation some of the most emotionally potent works of the classical world. His wit is sharp, his love poems emotionally charged and moving, his brief memorials to the dead profoundly haunting. His poems display the work of a subtle intellect, but he isn’t obscure. It takes no more effort for a modern reader to research names or places in a typical epigram than in any other popular classical work. Admittedly, though, Callimachus does not lead the reader into familiar territory. His is the knowledge of a scholar of the Greco-Roman world. He is known for having created a bibliographic survey of the contents of the famous Library of Alexandria, a work comprising 120 volumes that provided the basis for his own work on the history of Greek literature. He was one of the earliest poet-critics, and his work typifies Hellenistic scholarship.

And so, a reader may think such a poet’s work would be a series of dense, intellectual exercises, obscure to the point of impenetrability. But nothing could be further from the truth. Catullus writes about wanting to use Callimachus’s poems to “soften” Gellius’s feelings towards him: “I’ve spent hours wracking my brain to find a way / to send you some poems of Callimachus / that might soften you towards me.” And Ovid has this

to say about Callimachus, in his *Cures for Love*, where he advises young men to avoid reading love poetry, “Callimachus — he is certainly no enemy of love” and elsewhere, “there is no place in Callimachus’s verse for the anger of Achilles.”

The instances where Callimachus is mentioned in Catullus’s and Ovid’s work suggest he was considered a love poet of immense power. In the sixty-fourth epigram, he writes,

May your sleep, Conopion, be as unpleasant as mine,  
 as I lie here on your doorstep in the cold. Why do you  
     ignore my love?  
 I hope you’re unable to sleep, O faithless lover, as I am,  
     thinking of you.  
 Even in my dreams I can’t imagine you’d have pity on me.  
 Your neighbors pity me as they see me out here in the cold,  
 but you are silent and want nothing to do with my love.  
 Ah, but when you’re old and your hair is grey and you’re  
     alone  
 you’ll think of me and regret that you hurt the one who re-  
     ally loved you.

A lover’s despair, the urgency of his appeal, the setting of the poem on a doorstep in the cold, all these things create a powerful emotional response in a reader and show Callimachus to be the consummate lyrical poet. In the sixtieth epigram he writes:

I finally think Orestes was happy in old age, Leucarus,  
 because however mad he may have been,  
 he never suffered too much for love,  
 and repressed his feelings for Pyladae, his good friend.  
 If he had expressed his emotions in a dramatic play,  
     that would have been the end of their friendship.  
 I have lost many Pyladaes of my own  
 by opening up about how I felt.

Here Callimachus is surprisingly modern in his expression of a certain problem between love and friendship. Can happiness be

achieved by repressing love? The speaker in the poem suggests that, for Orestes, this is so because “had he expressed his emotions [for Pyladaes] in a dramatic play / that would have been the end of their friendship.” Orestes sacrifices love for friendship and thus, in his life, “never suffered too much for love.” In the last lines of the poem the speaker says he himself has experienced the truth of Orestes’ life: “I have lost many Pyladaes of my own / by opening up about how I felt.” Finally, in epigram forty-three, Callimachus writes,

If I serenaded you, Archinus, of my own free will  
 then you may whip me a thousand times.  
 But if I was forced, then please forgive me.  
 Drunk with love I was enchained.  
 The wine dragged me out of my home  
 while Love put song on my lips.  
 Suddenly I was in front of your door.  
 I did not raise my voice and shout your name  
 or your father’s name.  
 I just kissed your door.  
 If this is a crime, then punish me as you see fit.

Love is indeed blind, and lovers are never in control as much as they think they are. Is love born of free will or of intoxication — a lack of control? The speaker of the poem hesitates, “If I serenaded you, Archinus, of my own free will / then you may whip me a thousand times. / But if I was forced, then please forgive me.” His masochism may be understood as a ruse, a lover’s subterfuge in order to instill pity in the beloved, but the Ancient Greek conception of dominant/passive sexuality suggests another meaning. For the Greeks “sexual orientation” was not a social identifier as it has become in Western societies. In the consideration of sexual desire or behavior, the dominant or passive role assumed by the participants was important. The active role, penetrative, was associated with masculinity, higher social status, and adulthood and the passive role was associ-

ated with femininity, lower social status, and youth. Sometimes men flouted convention and assumed the passive role. In the forty-third epigram we see the tension between active and passive sexuality enacted. We don't know the age of the speaker, but we can safely assume the speaker is male, and perhaps he is attempting to go against convention by adopting a passive role. But for some reason he is resistant and hesitates.

There is another sequence of poems that show Callimachus to be a witty and insightful interpreter of his world. He writes in the twenty-sixth epigram,

I, a Greek Hero,  
 am placed near the door of Eëtion from Amphipolis  
 who is of Trojan descent.  
 I am only a small figurine set in a narrow hall.  
 I carry a sword in my right hand and a snake in my left.  
 Nothing more:  
 Angered with the man Epeius,  
 builder of the famous wooden horse,  
 Eëtion created the image of me without a horse,  
 as if I only travel by foot. I, a Greek Hero!

This poem belongs to a series of poems where the speaker is alternately a seashell, a "bronze cock," a mask, or in this case, a "small figurine." A.W. Mair, one of the earliest translators of Callimachus, provides this note about the epigram:

Heroes were usually represented on horseback and attended by a snake. But Eëtion is of Trojan descent, and hates the idea of a horse in consequence of the wooden horse made by Epeius. So the hero at his door is represented on foot.

I have attempted to make this translation as transparent as possible and I think a reader would understand the poem even without the note, but I repeat it here to show my debt to Mair's work. The Trojan War is one of the most important events in Greek mythology and has been widely influential throughout

Western literature and art. The most import hero for Callimachus is Heracles, the champion of the Olympian order who defended the Greeks against the chthonic beasts of the underworld. There are several poems to him among the epigrams. The hero in the Greek world was the epitome of masculine power, divinely inspired. Mair notes that the traditional image of the hero included him riding on his horse with his sword and a snake. But because he remembers the fiasco with the “wooden horse” in the story of the Trojan defeat, the Trojan, Eëtion, desecrates the image of a Greek hero. In the fiftieth epigram concerning the success of a comedy by Agoranax of Rhodes, Callimachus writes,

Stranger, I am a comic mask and I  
witness close up the success of this new comedy  
by Agoranax of Rhodes —  
My name is Pamphilus, and one of my expressions  
is love but I look like a wrinkled fig  
and my colors are so bright  
I glow like the lamps of Isis!

Sebastiana Nervegna writes in *Menander in Antiquity: The Contexts of Reception* that “Pamphilos is a name familiar from the New Comedy and the play Agonorax successfully competed with was either a revived New Comedy or a newly composed one.” Nevertheless, Callimachus’s wit is sharp as he adopts the role of a “mask” in order to poke fun at Agonorax’s “successful” comedy.

During the Hellenistic period, there a movement to reject the epic poems modeled on Homer’s *Illiad*, in favor of a form of poetry that was brief yet precise. He was less demotic than many of his contemporaries and chose to write about allusive rather than common subjects. Callimachus clearly states in the thirtieth epigram, “I hate the epic poem,” and his epigrams show that he was a master of the short form. In the prologue to his *Aetia*, he writes that Apollo visited him and admonished him to

“fatten his flocks, but to keep his muse slender,” a poetic stance that he rarely departed from. He was against the long-winded, old-fashioned poetry of the previous generations and stated his position clearly: “Big book, big bore.” In the thirteenth epigram, Callimachus reiterates his poetics. His critique is subtle.

The foreigner’s inscription is brief:

    THERIS      SON OF ARISTAEUS      CRETAN

    Even so, I think it’s too long.

The writing on the tombstone is by a “foreigner.” This is Callimachus’s way of rejecting as alien, foreign and strange that type of writing that adheres to outdated modes of expression — the epic poem. The seventh epigram is witty and intellectually sharp. The poem is concerned with this influence of Homer:

    I am the writings of Samos,  
     who was once visited by Apollo,  
 and I sing of the pain of Eurytus  
 and of blonde Ioleia,  
 but my work is attributed to Homer.  
 Zeus, is not *my* work as great as his?

Callimachus shows the difficulty of avoiding a comparison with Homer, the authority. The twenty-ninth epigram shows that the “anxiety of influence” is certainly not a new idea. The poem speaks of a poet, Aratus, and his adoption of some of the work of Hesiod:

    This is the writing of Hesiod!  
 It has Hesiod’s style  
 and is concerned with similar themes.  
 I don’t think Aratus, from Soli,  
 has copied Hesiod word for word,  
 only the best parts of his sweet verses.

His discourse is subtle.  
Hail Aratus, the thief of genius!

Historically, Aratus was a poet whose work broke away from Homeric influence. In the poem Callimachus is wonderfully ironic, and finally praises Aratus' work as "subtle," calling him a "thief of genius!" This last line recalls the popular saying: "Amateurs borrow, geniuses steal."

There are also a series of epigrams dealing with the theme of death. Euripides, in his play, *The Phoenician Women*, writes:

For those who are not dead must revere the god below  
by paying honor to the dead.

Funeral rites were a central and important aspect of the Ancient Greek world and a proper burial, whose elaborate rituals were usually performed by the women of the deceased, included the *prosthesis* (laying out of the body), the *ekphora* (the funeral procession) and the burial or cremation of the dead. In the twenty-second epigram Callimachus relates a terrible tragedy:

This morning  
we buried Melanippus.  
At sunset his sister Basilo  
committed suicide.

She could not endure  
the death of her brother,  
the pain of having to place his body on the pyre.  
And so the house of their father, Aristippus,  
witnessed two deaths at once. It is too much.  
All the women of Cyrene  
are in mourning,  
now the home  
of these happy children  
is deserted.

We notice the central role played by the women in mourning the dead. Melanippus's death causes his sister, Basilo, to commit suicide and thus to reject her role in the elaborate ritual of cremation. She could not endure the pain of "having to place his body on the pyre." Brother and sister dead and all the women in mourning, and the home of these "happy children" now empty. The twenty-first epigram is a brief elegy for a dead child:

Here is where Phillippus  
 buried his son, Nicoteles.  
 He had such high hopes for him.  
 And he was only twelve years old.

What is a modern reader to make of this epigram? Its brevity tempts a more casual reader to pass it by. Moreover, America is not a culture where death is as visible as it is in other parts of the world. But what if one reads it again and again, perhaps substituting for the Greek names, familiar names, perhaps drawn from people in one's own life. Then does the poem begin to register an emotional response? Can you imagine to yourself the father's grief? Epigrams like these are perhaps the most challenging because they invoke a sense of our own mortality, something Americans, in particular, never want to think about. From epigram eleven:

Here Saon of Acanthus, son of Dicon, sleeps as the blessed  
 sleep.  
 Do not say that the good "die."

The word Callimachus uses is ἀγαθός (*agathos*), which means *intrinsically* good, whether this goodness is visible to others or not. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates makes it clear that the soul who, in life, devotes itself to the Good is rewarded in the afterlife with a more pleasant existence than those who only lived for the pleasures of the world. Thus, it can be said that the good do not really "die" but continue to live a peaceful existence in the afterlife.

In the thirtieth epigram Callimachus gives the reader a brief sketch of his personality:

I hate the epic poem.  
 And I don't like to travel aimlessly.  
 I hate a lover who doesn't know what he wants.  
 And I don't drink just any bottle of wine.  
 I hate all common things and the vulgar public.  
 Ah, but Lysanias, how beautiful you are to me,  
 how like a god.  
 I so wish you were mine.  
 But just as I uttered this last word, "mine"  
 I heard an echo,  
 a voice said:  
 "He's someone else's man."

Callimachus was a consummate lyric poet who valued the brief, precise poem over the lengthy epic, a scholar who eschewed the "common things" in favor of the wide range of ideas he encountered while creating the bibliography for the Library of Alexandria, a man interested in quality over quantity, not one to wander aimlessly from town to town without a destination. And poetry was "hard work." Among all the works of the Classical world that were lost or exist only in paltry fragments, we are fortunate to have the epigrams of Callimachus whose immense power can be felt even across the many centuries separating us from his world.

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## The Death of a Bohemian Poet

### A Brief, Fictionalized Account of Martial's Life

Martial sits down at his desk and begins to write.<sup>1</sup> He's an old man now and has lived for many years in this old house in the Spanish countryside that his last patron, a lovely woman, had purchased for him. He has begun writing his memoirs, but he fears that he will not have time to finish the work. Manuscript pages are piled up next to him and lie scattered on the floor. He reflects on his life in Rome, the many emperors he served under. He thinks about his friends, many of them well known poets of the time, such as Juvenal; he also thinks of his many lovers, both male and female, and of his patrons.

He knew he was not a precocious child. His parents were afraid that he would amount to nothing. When he was in his early teens he started to go to the bathhouses and began to stay out late. It was common for him to arrive home early the next morning, at the crack of dawn. Neither his mother's tears nor his

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Valerius Martialis (38~41~102~104 CE) was a Roman poet from Hispania (modern Spain) best known for his series of Epigrams; they were published in Rome between 86 and 103, during the reigns of the emperors Domitian, Nerva, and Trajan. All the dialogue and translations are my own.

father's rage could change his generally lazy behavior and indifference when it came to working a normal job. After his first year at the university he discovered poetry and literature, and instead of reading the required books he read the epic poets of the past. He eventually rejected epic poetry for being too pompous and old-fashioned and was drawn, instead, to the cynics and satirical poets and soon began reading more contemporary poetry. He was fond of Pliny the younger, Juvenal, and Catullus. He also read Quintilian and the poets Silius and Valerius Flaccus. He hated Statius's *Thebaid*, and the feeling was mutual.

In 64 CE, he moved to Rome to become a poet. He was in his early twenties. Life in Rome was hard in those days. In the beginning, he had a difficult time adjusting to city life, and he often had to obtain favor with a patron in order to eat or even clothe himself. The times had changed. The old relationship between a free man and his patron, such as Virgil and Horace enjoyed under Maecenas, whereby a poet could return the favor with his verses, was no longer possible under Augustus and Domitian. But as his fame grew, he began to enter the literary circles in Rome. There, he befriended Juvenal and Pliny the Younger. He found the fashionable parties rather dull, except for the fact that he met Pliny the Younger at one of these. He found the aristocratic women intolerable and resented having to smile at their insipid and ridiculous jokes, and the men were even worse, with their endless chattering about how they had fought bravely in one war or other. The vanity of these personages was on full display at these events. He admits to himself, though, that he never knew them otherwise.

He was glad that his parents did not live to witness his difficult life in Rome, where he spent thirty-five years, but he knew that they would have been proud of him for winning so many awards and becoming famous throughout the world. He thinks of how much simpler the world seemed then. Now, that world seemed unreal to him. He looks at his many books on the shelf and then turns to the page before him and begins to write, "I am famous now, but in a certain sense, I am still that young man,

arriving in Rome with just a handbag and a few books, so many years ago. The world seems as strange to me now as it was then to that young man. I came to Rome wanting to be a poet, and I became one against all odds.” He turns the pages of his *Collected Epigrams* to book fourteen, and the 165th epigram. He reads, “This lyre helped Orpheus retrieve Eurydice from the underworld, / but he was too anxious to see her, / and such was his love that he lacked all self-control, / and so he lost her, forever.” He thinks of all the men and women he loved. Then he stands up and looks outside the window. The sun is sinking on the horizon. He stares at it for a moment and then returns to his desk. Soon the night will come. He closes the book, rests his head upon it, and falls asleep. He did not wake up the next morning.

His final book appeared in 102 CE, shortly before his death.

When Pliny received news of Martial’s death he wrote, “I am saddened by the passing of

Martial. He was a brilliant man, a genius, with a quick wit and piercing intelligence, who was always fair in his assessment of the social scenes in Rome. It is thought that his writings will not last. Perhaps they will not, but it must be said, that Martial believed they would.”

And thankfully for us, his readers, they have survived.



## On Ovid's *The Cures for Love*

Ovid's Love poems, *The Art of Love* and *The Cures for Love*, were immensely popular in their time and have exerted a wide influence on the West.<sup>1</sup> Chaucer was not the only poet who read Ovid's love poems, so did almost every educated person with any interest in the subject. His wit and humor were often lost among medieval scholars who recast his themes in terms of "courtly love," an idea that would have seemed ridiculous to Ovid. His women are often "found on the street," and in one poem he speaks of a "prostitute in Rome." He repeatedly speaks of love, sex, as a strategic game where the stakes are very high, and the loser often suffers greatly. His "cures" are exactly that, poems that attempt to remedy the pain of love.

The voice and the subject matter of these poems are surprisingly modern. The poems are ironic, cynical, as times even satirical, and essentially promote a hedonistic lifestyle. Perhaps there are still some readers who find Ovid offensive, but the truth is that there are many men who can relate to *The Cures for Love*. Ovid speaks primarily to them, but, to be fair, he writes,

But don't mistake me, girls, I am speaking to you as well as  
to the boys  
I arm you both with these lessons in love

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<sup>1</sup> All the translations of Ovid are my own.

and if what I say doesn't directly concern you don't worry, you may learn something anyway from the examples I provide.

I sometimes think of *The Cures for Love* as the first "self-help" book. But I doubt there is one on the shelves today that is more frank in its advice and severe in its methods. I imagine the book as a pamphlet that was once distributed among men who belonged to a secret fraternity. *Lempriere's Classical Dictionary* has this amusing description of *The Cures for Love* and its companion volume: "the doctrine which they hold forth is dangerous, and, as the composition of an experienced libertine and refined sensualist, they are to be read with caution, as they seem to be calculated to corrupt the heart, and sap the foundations of virtue and morality." Ovid tells lovers to avoid their partners, not to engage in magic, to spy on their lover in the bathroom, to have multiple partners and to never be jealous.

Ovid the poet takes on the role of the doctor, providing "cures" for those who have contracted "love's virus." His previous work, *The Art of Love*, taught men how to seduce women and how to keep their lovers. His *Cures for Love*, on the other hand, teaches, primarily men, how to fall out of love. In the first poem of the sequence, Ovid makes peace with Venus, concerning his new theme:

No, Venus, please don't misunderstand me, I as a poet have  
 always told lovers  
 to obey you and raised the standard you entrusted me with.  
 I'm no Diomedes, who dared to wound your own mother,  
 she  
 whom Mars helped and brought to heaven on his wild  
 horses.  
 Other men unlike myself play it cool when it comes to love  
 saying, "Well I've always been a good lover, and now if you  
 ask me

what I spend most of my time doing, well, it's looking for a good lay.

In these poems he will emphasize reason over passion. Here is the influence of the Stoics, who mistrusted the outbreak of passion when not moderated by good judgment. Ovid writes,

Love, I've always taught your lessons well and how to win  
 your favors,  
 yet the theme of this book is not passion but reason with no  
 offense to you intended.  
 Dear Cupid, in this new book I won't take back what I said  
 about you elsewhere.  
 Let he who is passionately in love enjoy all the delights of  
 his beloved,  
 let them be as free as the winds.  
 But the other guy, who's in a rotten relationship with a  
 worthless whore,  
 will avoid committing suicide if he takes the advice in this  
 book.

All the doctor's orders will be in accordance with what reason dictates.

In the eleventh poem, Ovid speaks of a man who was on his way to recovery but suffered a relapse: the young man visits a "red light district," and "Cupid [is] hot on his trail / He found himself talking to one of the prostitutes and that's when Cupid took aim and fired." He is a model case, the kind of man that all these poems are addressed to. He is our typical reader. So, love is like a tumor waiting patiently to become cancerous. Let's see what the doctor orders:

If you want to avoid contracting love's virus,  
 then you have to avoid surrounding yourself with those who  
 are infected.  
 Love is extremely contagious and in many cases the tumor  
 is inoperable.

The virus spreads like wildfire.  
 He must avoid her if he wants to forget her:  
 If the phone rings and it's her don't answer.  
 Don't obsess about all the reasons you have for getting out  
 of the relationship,  
 don't curse her under your breath.  
 Hold your tongue! Keep silent and after a while  
 you'll find she no longer means anything to you.  
 It's better to shut up and not keep boring your friends with  
 your tales of love.  
 The more you complain, saying things like, "I hate that  
 bitch", the more  
 you'll be stoking the flames of love when you should be try-  
 ing to put out the fire.

Ovid is aware that love is merely the other side of hate, a fact which is often taken for granted these days. Expressions of love as well as hate, "stok[e] the flames" of desire and frustrate the lover's attempt to end the relationship.

And even after he has successfully forgotten her, he must:

... avoid her mother, this is crucial, and her nurse and certainly her best friend.

You must avoid anyone who is associated with her.

They'll be of no help to you. According to them the breakup was your fault.

It is part of a process.

In the ideal situation, Ovid writes, "Let he who is passionately in love enjoy all the delights of his beloved, / let them be as free as the winds." But the problem of love is that men and women don't fall in or out of love at the same rate. There is always an imbalance, and he who loves more is in a weaker position because there is no outlet for the excess desire. Thus, Ovid suggests taking on multiple sexual partners:

when your heart is divided between two lovers  
 you won't risk loving one too much and Cupid, confused,  
 ends up splitting his arrow in half and so the effect is dimin-  
 ished.

Ovid recalls the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon at the start of the *Iliad*. Ovid writes that Chryseis and Agamemnon were "good for each other." He berates her father, Calchas, for interfering and calling on Apollo for help. Apollo, of course, responds with a plague upon the Greeks. Agamemnon is forced to give up Chryseis. In the exchange with Achilles, he is given Briseis. Ovid states the moral of the story in this way: "And now you can see what happened when he exchanged Chryseis / for Briseis: It was as if Chryseis never existed." And furthermore:

So learn from Agamemnon's example and rule out mo-  
 nogamy,  
 divide your love among many women and never fall victim  
 to a single flame  
 too hot for you to handle.

The story of "Achilles' Anger" takes up a significant portion of the poem and is a story that Ovid comes back to in other poems as well. In retelling the story of Agamemnon's love for the slave girl, Chryseis, I suspect Ovid might be poking fun at the Emperor, Caesar Augustus. In 8 CE, Ovid was banished to the city of Tomis on the Black Sea coast by the Emperor, without the involvement of the Senate or any Roman judge. It is one of the most mysterious incidents in literary history. There has been much speculation among scholars about the possible ways he may have angered the Emperor. The entry concerning Ovid, in *Lempriere's Classical Dictionary* of 1788, has this to say about his banishment:

The true cause of this sudden exile is unknown. Some attribute it to a shameful amour with Livia, the wife of Augustus, while others maintain that it arose from the knowledge

which Ovid had of the unpardonable incest of the emperor with his daughter Julia. These reasons are indeed merely conjectural, the cause was of a very private and secret nature, of which Ovid himself is afraid to speak, as it arose from error and not from criminality.

It is just such a conjecture, as perhaps only the morality of the eighteenth was capable of, that makes it believable that the story of Agamemnon was Ovid's attempt to slight the Emperor. The Julian Marriage Laws of 18 BCE were instituted to promote monogamous heterosexual coupling to increase the population's birth rate. Ovid's promotion of a hedonistic lifestyle would not have found favor with the Emperor's new legislation.

Ovid also advises our reader against using magic to change the course of love. He tells the example of Circe's doomed love for Ulysses. He writes, "Circe, I know you're an adept and can change men into a million different shapes. / But tell me, why doesn't magick work on your own heart and change sadness to happiness?" Magic was considered by the stoics to be contrary to the powers of reason and thus to be avoided. Ovid concurs: "That hocus pocus is old news, anyway." He concludes,

Circe was enraged and immediately consulted her book of  
 Black Magick,  
 but every spell of witchcraft rebounded against her  
 as if her attempts to quench the fire of love only increased  
 its intensity.  
 So if you suffer from love, follow the rules I am outlining in  
 this book,  
 and never seek consolation in the Black Arts  
 especially if you value your own sanity.

The use of magick only ends up being yet another way for the lover to preoccupy himself with the beloved where any attempt "to quench the fire of love" only increases its intensity.

Ultimately, for Ovid, love is a power game. He tells our young man to avoid the trap of jealousy that excites feelings of love or

hatred, two sides of the same coin. He must never exhibit this weakness before the beloved. He must never be jealous of the "other man." Ovid uses the example of Menelaus and Helen:

Ah Menelaus why weep now? Your wife was not with you as  
 you travelled to Crete  
 and you remained apart for such a long time.  
 Yet when Paris carried her off to Troy it was then that you  
 missed your Helen.  
 It was this alone that caused you to love her more.

Ovid is sarcastic and presents an unflattering portrait of King Menelaus. Perhaps Ovid is suggesting all was not well in the court of Augustus. Indeed, kings as well as peasants were not safe from the trials of love. Ovid advises the young man not to avoid his rival. He says, "Now even if you hate him (it's still too soon) you should make every attempt to at least acknowledge him." The young man will be cured when he "is able to embrace and kiss" his enemy.

Ovid advises our young man to use his imagination to paint an unflattering portrait of his beloved and so begin to initiate negative feelings towards her:

Now's the time to take action, to move forward,  
 so plunge those spurs deep into your horses sides,  
 ready the whip and fly! Use your imagination!  
 Make believe her house is a den of Lotus-eaters, a Cave of  
 Sirens,  
 a pit-stop for the dead on their way to Hades!

One of the more curious remedies involves spying on your lover while she's in the bathroom. First surprise her as she's waking up: "And if you can, surprise her at dawn when her breath stinks and she has no make-up on her face." Then, Ovid continues,

So, finally, what you must do is spy on her (without her  
 knowing)

while she's smearing her face with all that make-up in front  
of the mirror.  
You'll see her use all the colors of the rainbow,  
and various other concoctions some of which drip onto her  
sagging tits.  
The whole bathroom stinks like Phineus's dinner table  
and recalling that stench even now makes me want to vomit.

This is part of a process, that began with the use of the imagination, that Ovid believes will cause the lover in despair to utterly reject his partner. Here's another example that also shows Ovid's sense of humor:

If she can't sing have her practice Rosetta's part in the score  
from Rossini's opera.  
If she can't dance to save her life audition her for the Russian  
ballet.  
If she speaks like a barbarian let her recite Proust.  
If she can't play a single chord ask her play a fugue on the  
guitar.  
If she develops asthma when she runs sign her up for a  
marathon.  
If she has pimples on her breast spend a lot of time at a top-  
less beach.  
If her teeth are ugly learn as many jokes as you can to make  
her laugh.  
If she has watery eyes tell her stories that make her cry.

And lastly, "excess" will remedy the pain of love:

If a man's thirsty then he's got to have a drink.  
So take your fill of her to the extreme!  
Fuck her night and day every day, become obsessed with  
her,  
pick her dresses for her, bathe with her, kiss her first thing in  
the morning,  
become utterly satiated with her

until you're so sick of her  
 you feel liking vomiting.  
 Excess will cure you of love.

Ovid is a realist disguised as an aesthete and vice versa. The beloved object is the subject of various projections on the part of the beloved. He sees her as a beautiful *object*. This is important to understand, otherwise Ovid's remedy concerning excessive behavior would not be believable. Greco-Roman ideas of the Beautiful have greatly influenced European culture. It is this classical idea of "beauty" that Ovid is critical of. Here he is not the lover but the doctor who sees the naked body on the operating table. Beauty, the world of appearances is debased in favor of reality, which is sometimes shocking, but often causes the mirage of love to shatter. On the other hand, the illusion of beauty and sensuality can also be destroyed in another way, through excess that breaks unconscious habits.

His hope for the young man is that his ex will no longer concern him, that he will have finally left her, not only in body but in mind, and can "please [himself]" with many other women:

She'll soon be a stranger to you,  
 so treat her like a casual acquaintance  
 and please yourself instead with many other women.

Finally, for Ovid, it is best to "please yourself" and to have multiple sexual partners, and if you decide not to keep love totally out of the picture, then at least keep Cupid at bay. With this advice Ovid concludes *The Cures for Love*.

I imagine Ovid as a fiercely independent poet, willing to follow his own desires, despite resistance from his father. About Ovid, John Lempriere writes:

As he was intended for the bar, his father sent him early to Rome, and removed him to Athens in the sixteenth year of his age. The progress of Ovid in the study of eloquence was great, but the father's expectations were frustrated; his son

was born a poet, and nothing could deter him from pursuing his natural inclination, though he was often reminded that Homer lived and died in the greatest poverty.

That he ended his life in exile, under mysterious circumstances, only confirms that his poetry must have carried a certain dangerous emotional current that ran counter to the Imperial Era. It would also be a disruptive force in the centuries to come.

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## The Letters of Pliny the Younger

### A Balance between the Public Persona and the Private Life

The letters of Pliny the Younger offer the reader a rich and varied portrait of administrative and personal life in the first century CE.<sup>1</sup> Among Pliny's correspondents are the Emperor Trajan, with whom he exchanges a series of important letters on the treatment of Christians, Trajan's chief of staff, Lucius Licinius Sura, to whom he writes a letter concerning the existence of ghosts, and the historian Cornelius Tacitus, to whom he relates an incident from his own life that he desires to be included in the historian's pages. In the letters, we witness his fair and humane treatment of slaves, his shrewd negotiations as a lawyer, his love of an adoring young wife, his inquisitive mind inquiring about the supernatural, his approach to the art of writing, the importance he gives to, among other things, the art of translation, his disappointment at the indifference of an audience at a poetry reading, and his willingness to point out the pretensions of a host at a dinner party. But he is not above jockeying for a place in the pages of Tacitus's histories. We might ask how much of what we read in these letters is truth and how much a façade.

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1 The translations of Pliny throughout are my own.

Of course, a letter is unlike an historical document or scientific study which at least intends to strive for objective truth. Pliny had a distinguished career in government and thus all his actions, including these letters, published in several volumes in his lifetime, were visible to the public and to the Emperor. As we read, we must also be conscious of this fact and not be over hasty in our judgment of Pliny's character. Upon first reading we can say he is humane and loving, politically shrewd and inquisitive. And this would be accurate. But we cannot know the extent to which he is "being himself." Is he hiding his real thoughts and simply adopting a kind of mask for professional purposes? His style, as opposed to Cicero's, which he followed early on in his career, is elaborate and less direct. Pliny's public persona is carefully balanced against his private thoughts. He is in fact writing his own biography. And who of us, in a similar position, would be completely truthful, even as we strove to be honest, in our expression of ourselves, if we knew that the entire world would read our pages. Indeed, it is for this reason, and also since many of his correspondents were famous in their own right, that the letters of Pliny the Younger are such a fascinating and unique document. So, let us begin to examine these letters and see if we can create a portrait of Pliny the Younger carefully, remembering it is just as likely as not that he is showing us himself as he would like to be seen.

On the subject of this theme, of the public and private persona, I would like to examine the following letter to the historian Tacitus. Pliny the Younger writes,

I strongly predict (and about this fact I have no reason to doubt) that your histories will be immortal. Believing this sincerely to be the case, I all the more desire a place in them. If we are generally very careful to choose the best artist to do a portrait of our face then does it not stand to reason that one's actions ought to be celebrated by an author like yourself? And so in view of this, I would like to relate to you a story, which I'm certain you're already familiar with, as it was

highly publicized at the time, yet still I'll repeat it now, that you may realize how valuable it is to me that my role in these events, well-known because of the dangerous circumstances in which I acted, may receive an additional luster from the pen of so bright a genius as yourself.

Here Pliny is creating a public image of himself. He asks Tacitus to record an event that relates how he defended a friend during the prosecution of Baebius Massa for extortion. Herennius Senecio, together with whom Pliny led the prosecution, sought to establish a further "preventive measure" against Massa after the case was over. Massa in retaliation accused Senecio of having a "personal vendetta" against him and threatened to prosecute him in turn for "high treason." Pliny, witnessing his friend being threatened, speaks to the court, "Most noble consuls, I believe that for some reason Massa is implying that I have betrayed the interests of my client in this case, since he has failed to mention that he will prosecute me as well." He defends his friend by daring Massa to prosecute him as well. It is certain that Massa would not prosecute Pliny given his prestige and his association with the Emperor. And he used his own power and influence to defend Senecio. He concludes the letter,

The late Emperor Nerva (who in the days before he became Emperor would keep track of every worthy political event) wrote a very impressive letter to me, applauding not only myself but the Age that he said had produced such an orator who embodied the spirit (as he liked to call it) of the ancients.

But whatever my action signifies, I know you will enhance and spread the glory of it; not that I require you to exceed the limits of reality. History should never depart from the truth nor does any noble act require any more than its truthful depiction.

The description of a "noble act" should not "exceed the limits of reality," because it should require no more than a "truthful depiction." Clearly, in this letter, Pliny shows the importance of

maintaining a certain kind of public persona. He is seeking a well-known historian to recreate that persona in his pages. He calls upon Tacitus to “enhance and spread the glory of [his action].”

Pliny’s letter to his young wife’s aunt adds another dimension to his portrait. Here he writes about his wife, Calpurnia, who was fourteen years old when they married. Pliny was forty years old. She was his third wife, and he shows genuine affection towards her. The beginning of the letter is addressed to his wife’s aunt. He writes,

You stand out as an exemplary model of tender regard to your family in general and to your late brother in particular, whose feelings of affection and companionship you returned with an equal fervor, and you have not only exhibited the kindness of an aunt but supplied the warmth that a father shows to his daughter; and I am persuaded to say, with unwavering honesty, and pleasure, that she, in her capacity, behaves in a manner worthy of her father, her grandfather, and yourself.

He applauds the positive influence that she had on his young wife, such that she, Calpurnia, “behaves in a manner worthy of her father, her grandfather, and yourself.” In Pliny’s description of his wife there is real tenderness and genuine love. A reader has no doubt that she also adored him and fully returned that love. He writes,

She discriminates with the eye of one sure in her judgment, she is prudent, and her love for her husband is virtuous and bespeaks a chaste nature. Her affection for me has aroused her interest in literature, and she reads my compositions with pleasure, often memorizing them and afterwards repeating to me word for word the contents, she always has a copy ready in her hands. How attentive she is to my every argument when I am beginning a new case, curious about my

line of reasoning. And she is as relieved and joyous as I am when the case has finally concluded. During the court proceedings, just as I've begun my opening arguments, she will quickly send for messengers to relay to her the impressions my case is making on the jurors, the amount of applause I receive, and the success, lastly, of my closing arguments. When I am giving a lecture in an auditorium, she hides behind the curtains at the back and peaks out at the audience and at me, listening, greedily, to my every word and following the logic of my argument. She adapts my lyrics to music and plays the resulting songs beautifully on her lyre. She has no other instructor in this but Love.

And he is sincere when he writes,

But her devout nature is a product of your training and instruction and as she was growing up under your roof she was surrounded by all that was sacred and moral. And did she not learn how to love me as a result of your description of my character? You revered my mother as your own and it was you who shaped and encouraged my character from infancy, thus it is no mystery that I should have become the kind of man my wife is in love with.

It is a letter that shows Pliny was deeply in love with his new wife and that she returned that love. It is one of his most beautiful letters. And yet, if we are to keep in mind the intricate relation between the public persona and the private life, we need to remember, that this is Pliny's *portrait* of his wife. And we must remember, also, that these letters were for publication.

The following letter to Valerius Paulinus shows Pliny's humane treatment of his servant, Zosima. In describing him, he writes,

He has never been known to speak ill of anyone and is, besides, well educated, though presently he plays the role of comedian, perhaps not befitting one such as himself, though

nevertheless it is an occupation at which he excels. He speaks, placing great emphasis on his words and his judgment is sound. He is moral and I admit not very graceful in his movements, though one shouldn't hold this against him. He plays the lyre far better than a comedian ought to. Furthermore, he is so well read in poetry, philosophy, and oratory one would think the study of these subjects was his native occupation. I am elaborating on all these qualities to show that he has many services, outside the ones most normally reserved for his occupation, from which I benefit.

I would like to note at this point Pliny's letter to Fuscus, where he writes,

A part of my day is also spent listening (not as often as they would like I'm sure) to the complaints of my tenants: their rustic manner of speaking amuses me and yet truly I find a certain dynamic quality in their speech, a quality that I bring over to my own studies and also to those engagements of a politer sort.

Pliny engages with his servants and with the common people in a way that reminds me of Proust's consulting his servants for various bits of gossip. But of course, unlike Proust, Pliny was a politician, and his dealings with servants and the people was, in a certain sense, always political. In the letter to Paulinus, Pliny writes that on more than one occasion Zosima became ill and coughed up blood. The first time, Pliny sent Zosima to Egypt where he received the care that he needed and returned home completely healed. This second time, Pliny will send him to a farm to recuperate and relates the details associated with Zosima's journey in the letter. Concerning Zosima, he writes,

But even if I were of a more rough and hardened disposition, if my servant Zosima, a freed-man, (who it must be admitted has the greater right to be treated humanely as he is more in need of such treatment) was ever taken with a serious illness,

or indeed even a mild cold, such would be my response that I would immediately offer him aid.

These two letters show that Pliny treated his servants humanely and was friendly to his “tenants”; he felt genuine affection for Zosima and was in a sense inspired by the “rustic” manner in which the common people argued their points.

For comparison, there is Pliny’s letter to Acilius, where he tells of the slaves’ brutality against their slave-master, Larcus Macedo. Pliny, in order to be fair, describes who Macedo was:

an arrogant man, who indeed thought too much of himself, and treated his slaves with a severity commensurate with his tyrannical character, too little or rather too much aware that his own father had been in such a position once.

But, nevertheless, he did not deserve to be so brutally beaten by his own slaves that he died. Pliny concludes,

It is clear the extent to which we are potential victims of dangerous and often violent actions against our person such that our dignity is outraged, and our body slaughtered. Nor does leniency or respectful treatment of slaves ensure the prevention of such barbaric acts. It is not quiet reflection, but the spontaneous eruption of hatred that arms these malicious ruffians against their masters.

Before I conclude this discussion of Pliny’s treatment of people who are of a lower social status, I would like to examine a letter to Avitus that concerns a gathering of friends for dinner and Pliny’s reaction to what he sees. Of the peculiar behavior of the host, Pliny writes,

Some very exquisite dishes were served to him [the host] and several others while the remaining guests had placed before them insufficient amounts of what, in any case, seemed barely edible. Before him he also had several bottles of wine

of varying vintages, but you must not think that the guests were free to choose their favorite variety; in fact no one was allowed to choose at all. He set aside a bottle for himself and me; the next was for those friends he considered of a "lower order" (it must be understood that he measures his friendships according to "quality" as he does his wines); the third and last bottle he reserved for his servants and my own.

So the quality of the food and wine that each guest was being served was predetermined according to their social status. Someone at the dinner asks Pliny whether or not he approves of this method. He responds that he doesn't. As the conversation continues, Pliny is asked what he would do differently. His response is:

I would distribute the bottles equally among the guests, for when I arrive to dine with people I expect a certain amount of courtesy and certainly not to be censored. Each man that I have invited to my table is on an equal footing with myself and each other and this equality will be observed in all aspects of the dining experience.

Someone asks him "Servant's as well?" and Pliny responds, "Yes, even them, for on an occasion such as this, where we are all seated together, I consider him no longer a servant but a trusted companion." The man responds again to Pliny, "But this must be a great added expense for you." Pliny concludes the letter:

I assured him that this was not the case; and when he continued, asking how it could be done, I responded, "You must know that the servants do not drink the same vintage wine that I do and moreover, I drink the wine that they prefer." And certainly if a man is able to balance his appetite, thus reducing waste, he will not find it a great expense to feed all his guests, with equal portions of a quality cuisine, as he does so himself. Restrain your appetite, and, so to speak, diminish that weakness, and you will find yourself better able to

economize in good faith. You will find your own temperance a much better guide in reducing your expenses so that you don't end up offending your guests.

The man that emerges from these series of letters is humane in his treatment of and concern for those with a lower social status. But he is appalled by the brutality they are also sometimes capable of if not checked. Pliny is eminently just, a man familiar with Roman law, who had many years of experience in rhetoric and oration, who knew how to negotiate for the rights of his client while maintaining the ethics of the law, and who knew how to balance the public and private spheres.

Pliny the Younger's letters can be regarded as models of their form. They were used well into the eighteenth century as educational tools in writing and rhetoric. In this context, I would like to turn to the following letter to Fuscus, who had written to Pliny inquiring about "the method ... to use when pursuing [his] studies." Pliny begins by speaking about the importance of translation and then continues to elaborate on other helpful practices to improve one's writing. The beginning is worth quoting in full since so much of what Pliny says is now common practice for writers:

Translation is a very important skill to develop and so I recommend (as many poets and writers in general do) translating from Latin into Greek or from Greek into Latin. This way you will learn many new and elegant expressions, a variety of colloquialisms, and forceful turns of phrase. Also, to imitate authors allows you not only to invent after their manner but to become better acquainted with their language and little will escape you when translating: this method will improve your critical reading skills and increase your ability to judge the quality of a work.

It may benefit you, also, when you have read enough of an author, such that you consider yourself fairly knowledgeable about his work, to hone your insights by carrying his ideas in your mind such that, after much thinking, you feel you

now can consider him your rival by writing a composition on the same subject; now compare your work and his and minutely examine both his text and yours. You will feel that you achieved a great victory on points where you succeeded in bettering him in your exposition as you will suffer humiliation if you find that his argument is logically sound on every point and immune to your critique.

You may dare to take the most brilliant passage from a work and try to better it yourself. This is bold indeed but as it is performed in secret and without an audience you cannot be accused of being presumptuous. And yet there are those with sufficient confidence who take on the task of adopting the voice of a great author only to better him in speech and they receive great applause, I might add, and because they dispense with being overly critical of their own work, they advance beyond those authors they thought brilliant enough to follow.

Pliny's suggestions here are especially useful when a writer is just starting out. The following reminds of something one might encounter in Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*. Yet whatever one thinks of that text, the advice Pliny offers is sound:

I know that your concern at present is forensic oratory and yet I would suggest that you not always take that line of reasoning and learn to vary your approach by exploring different subjects. A farmer rotates the various crops he plants to improve the quality of his land and so the mind is enriched by studying different subjects. Therefore, it is useful to single out a brilliant passage from an historical text and then to practice writing letters with that text in mind. Often in pleading a case, one has recourse to both an historical style as well as a poetical style in developing one's argument and furthermore a succinct and polished style is cultivated by writing letters. It is also well to ease your mind by reading poetry and when I say this I do not mean a long and sustained work

(for only men of leisure have the time to engage in this activity), but the short witty epigrams which serve to relieve your tensions and allow you to pass a few moments away from the more pressing work. These short poems are usually thought of as entertainments, but these witty epigrams are often better known than longer, more serious poetry.

He concludes this letter with the following remarks on what to read:

Remember, when studying a topic, to read the best that was ever written on the subject; as the saying goes, “though we should know much, we should not read many books.” I should not need to tell you exactly who those authors are, since they are generally well known. Though I have extended this letter far beyond the length I originally intended, nevertheless, if you follow my advice, you will find your own time spent studying considerably shortened.

It is a fascinating letter, in which we read of the program of study suggested by a cultivated Roman gentleman of wealth in the first century CE, who would write, furthermore, in a letter to Arrianus, of the attitude one should adopt towards this study:

Nothing, in my opinion, enables us to approach our studies with a graceful and genial air, as we do our manners, then to temper seriousness with good humor, since there is always the chance that the former may turn into arrogance and the latter is too close to frivolity.

Pliny the Younger wrote hundreds of letters, many of which survive and are of great historical importance to our understanding of the first century of the Common Era. We must not be misled into thinking of these letters as intimate in the same way our own contemporary letters are considered intimate. They are not private; they were reworked for publication and their survival today is largely due to their popularity. They do not so much give

us Pliny's "personality" — it would be wrong to use this modern word with all its psychological implications to speak of a Roman of the first century CE — as they do the public persona that he cultivated throughout his career. This is not to suggest that his opinions and his moral sense are somehow inauthentic. It is better to say that it is not quite Pliny "expressing himself" in these letters. Perhaps one can say the public and the private merge and are almost one and the same thing for Pliny the Younger.

He was born an aristocrat and rose through many imperial and civil offices, finally serving as the imperial magistrate under the emperor Trajan. We do not know much about his old age, though it is thought that he died suddenly around 113 CE, during his appointment in Bithynia Pontus, a province of the Roman Empire on the Black Sea coast of Anatolia (Turkey); nothing in his letters refers to later than that date. We do know that he made a will in which he called for the release of hundreds of slaves and established a fund to support them after his death. It is a great testament to the humane treatment that Pliny observed with those of a lower social status. The letters of Pliny the Younger offer the reader a fascinating portrait of Roman society in the first century CE as seen through the eyes of a cultivated Roman aristocrat. They are a unique document and as such we are fortunate that they have survived to this day.

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## Catullus's Circle of Friends

Catullus was born into a wealthy family of Verona, around 82 BCE.<sup>1</sup> He was a rebel of the Latin world, a great poet, and a man with a big heart. In poem one, he applauds Cornelius's bold effort to "explicate the history of the world in just three papyrus rolls" and offers him his book. Cornelius Nepos was an historian from Cisalpine Gaul who wrote a three-volume history, *Chronica*. Let's imagine that this is Catullus's first book of poems and that he gives it to his mentor. He did, in fact, dedicate his poems to Nepos. In the poem he is modest, but at the same time bold, asserting that the book "will be remembered for all eternity." He can be gentle with "Veranius," whom he affectionately calls "Veran," taking him into his home after his travels, and listening to his stories, desiring to "kiss your mouth, your sweet eyes." He is happy in the company of his friend. Then there's "Lesbia," the woman that scholars believe Catullus fell in love with in Rome. Her real name was Clodia, and she was the daughter of Appius Claudius Pulcher, consul in 79 BCE and sister of Clodius Pulcher. She belonged to a distinguished Latin family. To Catullus, she is "the epitome of beauty." But Catullus writes in poem eighty-six, of her very beauty "that attracts all these other women to her." During the Roman Imperial Era references to same-sex relations between women are more frequent than during the

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<sup>1</sup> All the following translations of Catullus are my own.

Republic. Since Romans believed that the sexual act required a dominant and a passive partner and was essentially “phallic” in character, portrayals of women included phallic acts, such as penetrating boys with a dildo. In poem seventy-nine, Catullus speaks of Lesbia’s desire to obtain his boy for pleasure. Clodia married Caecilius Metellus Celer, in 63 BCE and was eventually suspected of poisoning him to death. Catullus, who had an affair with her during her marriage, speaks about her terrible rages and insults her husband by suggesting he knows this aspect of her personality very well indeed:

Lesbia screams and insults me in front of her husband  
and the simple-minded fool simply grins. He’s evidently  
content  
and knows nothing! Listen now, you mule!, if she could  
forget about me she’d shut up  
and not throw these crazy fits: but because she whines like  
a little girl  
and hurls curses at me means she remembers me, and what  
is  
much worse, infinitely worse, is that when she’s really pissed  
(like now!)  
she works herself up into a state of rage beyond belief  
and then begins to talk and talk and talk!

After her husband’s death, she has an affair with Caeluis, one of Catullus’s friends. In the following poem, Catullus suffers a fit of jealousy as Lesbia ignores him and fixes her eyes on yet another man:

To me that man over there seems equal to a god  
and I mean no offense to any sacred law,  
but I think he even surpasses the gods.  
He sits opposite you, repeatedly looks at you and listens,  
I can hear your sweet laughter ringing in my ears,  
and I am quickly silenced.

The result is my wretched state,  
 all my sense leaves me. Why?  
 Because I realize as he looks at you, Lesbia,  
 nothing remains for me.

\* \* \* \* \*

My tongue is numb, a fire burns in my groin.  
 Now my ears are ringing with the sound  
 of their mutual laughter. I am insane with jealousy!

Thankfully, the night covers both my eyes in darkness.  
 Idleness, Catullus, that is your trouble,  
 the reason for your manic static and paralyzing despair.  
 Remember, a life of leisure has brought kings to their knees  
 and prosperous cities to utter ruin.

She even lures a man that Catullus himself was interested in away from him. He is weakened and hurt by her fluctuating love and writes, "it's just the same story over and over again. / Her words can't be trusted. / They might as well have been written in the air."

On the other hand, there is the fury and hatred that Catullus expresses in the poems. Catullus will not be pushed around or, to put it more plainly, and in contemporary terms: he wouldn't have taken lightly being called a faggot in the street. In poem sixteen, he tells Aurelius and Furius that he'll "face-fuck and sodomize" them both if they think that because he writes lines like "I'll give you a thousand kisses" his virility is compromised. They think his verses are indecent and "prissy." He writes, "the true poet should be chaste in his life but not necessarily in his verses." He also challenges Ravidus who thinks only a "corrupt mind" would read his verses. The Filth and the Fury all over again! Catullus makes the headlines and the caption reads: "Catullus face-fucks Ravidus to death." It should be noted here that there was a difference between Roman and Greek homosexuality. The Romans, in fact, had no precise term for homosexuality or heterosexuality. The dichotomy with regard to sexuality was expressed as active (sodomy)/masculine and passive (fellatio)/feminine. Roman men were free to have sex with males with-

out any perceived loss of masculinity or social status, provided that they took the dominant role which meant penetration. For this reason, in poem eighty, Catullus mocks Gellius whom he believes engages secretly in oral sex with men. In poem fifteen, “Ad Marcum Tullium Ciceronem,” he threatens Aurelius. Catullus tells him that if he has sex with his boy, Juventius, he will stuff radishes and mallets into his anus. And then there is Marcus Tullius (Cicero), who is only one in a line of pompous orators that Catullus satirizes:

You’re one of the most eloquent orators  
 from the descendants of Romulus  
 and there are just as many others now,  
 Marcus Tullius,  
 and more to come!,  
 but thank you for thinking of me,  
 the great Catullus  
 the worst poet,  
 the absolute worst,  
 just like you who are the Patron of all!  
 p.s. I wish you my best.

Then there are the complicated relationships with Gellius and Juventius. Gellius was a consul in 36 BCE and a commander in Mark Antony’s navy at Actium in 31 BCE. He has an affair with Clodia and with his uncle’s wife. He is also accused by the Senate of having an affair with own his stepmother. In poem eighty-nine, Catullus emphasizes Gellus’s “thinness” as a quality of moral depravity. Catullus is implying that he is “thin” like a girl. In the Roman world a feminine man was looked down upon and likely to be passive in a sexual encounter. His “femininity” was in opposition to the Roman “cult of virility.” Catullus sums up his opinion of Gellius in poem ninety-one, after having found out about his affair with Clodia: “you delight in every game, no matter what, / as long as it’s even a tiny bit transgressive.” Juventius, Catullus’s boyfriend, was born into a

rich family. In Roman antiquity boys were bought and sold as sex objects, but the buyer needed the owner's permission before having sex with his boy. In poem fifteen, Catullus tells Aurelius, "When you're randy, I know you'll fuck anything! / But please keep away from my boyfriend, Juventius." Juventius consistently frustrates Catullus's love. Poem eighty-one, "Ad Juventium," is characteristic:

Juventius, from all the pretty men in all the bathhouses in  
Rome,  
couldn't you have picked up  
someone other than this young punk  
from the filthy district of Pisaurum?  
The only thing yellower than his complexion  
is that old gilded statue of Caesar!  
And, to make matters worse,  
you say he turns you on!  
You mean you like him more than me?  
Can't you see you're being a real asshole?

Catullus's poems are a Dionysian orgy of lust and ecstasy and hatred that clash with the genteel, aristocratic heritage, whose embodiment is the affluent Clodia, whose family was of the famous Claudian line. She rejects him and causes him great pain on numerous occasions. Even the boy, Juventius, and the young man, Gellius, are figures of deceit and prove unfaithful and resistant to Catullus's love. Finally, in poem 105, Catullus writes:

Mr. Cock strives to climb up the Parnassus,  
but the Muses (those sluts!) prick him with their pitchforks  
and yell, "GET OUT"!

Catullus's sadism is driven as much by love's failure as by a genuine disgust with pompous orators and pretension in all its forms. Clodia's own pretentiousness and profligate nature make Catullus unable to maintain friendly feelings towards her. In fact, the more he loves her the less he is able to treat her with kindness. In

her presence, he reverts to the figure of an innocent schoolboy trying to impress her. She is permanently on the defensive, seated on a pedestal too high for him to reach her. A moment of tenderness occurs with Caelius, with whom he develops a “unique friendship” during a time when the “furious flame scorched my genitals,” perhaps when he was younger or during a moment of loneliness. He wishes him success in love and happiness. But it is this same Caelius who, on another occasion, will betray Catullus with Clodia. One rare instance of real affection and love occurs with Veranius, and not with Lesbia, with whom he shares sporadic moments of happiness in an otherwise hopeless love, nor with Ispitilla, a prostitute with whom Catullus merely has sex, nor with the vain Gellius and not, finally, with the boy, Juventius. I believe it is important to note that, despite the popularity of the many poems written to Lesbia that are largely a catalogue of difficulties and failures and, admittedly, of great lyrical power, if one is to find moments of real tenderness and love in Catullus’s poetry, however transitory, one has to look to his relations with his male friends. He is a punk with a big heart but not a *pathicus*, a poet of great lyric power and wit but not someone to mess with when his anger is aroused.

At last there are the following fragments that could serve as an epitaph:

1.

I dedicate to you and consecrate this sacred grove, Priapus

...

in Lampsacus, where your house is and sacred grove

... Priapus ... especially for you,

who are worshiped at the mouth of the Hellespont, in the  
cities

and elsewhere.

2.

my passion is the MEAT

3.  
you won't escape the bite of my poem

Here Catullus praises Priapus, a fertility god marked by a large, permanently erect penis. Fragment three is interesting. Perhaps he is speaking of his doomed love for Clodia, his burning anger and disgust, or does it simply express his confident attitude that his enemies in general will not escape his ridicule and fury? Much of Latin poetry has been consigned to oblivion. Let us be thankful for what remains and, above all, for the poetry of Gaius Valerius's Catullus.

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## On the Letters of Apollonius of Tyana

Most of what we know about Apollonius of Tyana comes from the biography of him written by Philostratus the Elder (c. 170–247 CE).<sup>1</sup> The general picture of him that emerges in the letters is of a wandering philosopher of the Pythagorean school who, in his writings, emphasized the importance of disciplined spiritual work, was critical of the Greeks whom he believed had declined into moral depravity, and set out to advise his disciples about the ways in which one could arrive at knowledge of the ways of God. He was a contemporary of Jesus Christ, and this has led many scholars, both contemporary and classical, to draw comparisons between them. The Biblical scholar Bart D. Ehrman speaks of Apollonius in his introduction to his textbook on the New Testament. There he describes him as an important figure from the first century without first revealing he is writing about Apollonius of Tyana:

Even before he was born, it was known that he would be someone special. A supernatural being informed mother the child she was to conceive would not be a mere mortal but would be divine. He was born miraculously, and he became an unusually precocious young man. As an adult he left home and went on an itinerant preaching ministry, urging

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1 All of the following translations of Apollonius of Tyana are my own.

his listeners to live, not for the material things of this world, but for what is spiritual. He gathered a number of disciples around him, who became convinced that his teachings were divinely inspired, in no small part because he himself was divine. He proved it to them by doing many miracles, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. But at the end of his life he roused opposition, and his enemies delivered him over to the Roman authorities for judgment. Still, after he left this world, he returned to meet his followers in order to convince them that he was not really dead but lived on in the heavenly realm. Later some of his followers wrote books about him.

Compare this to the words of Apollonius in a letter to the Ephesians who frequented the temple of Artemis. There, he writes,

There is come from Greece a man who is not Greek by race, and though not an Athenian or indeed a native of Megara, yet his name is synonymous with hard work and spiritual discipline. He comes to make his home among you and to dwell with your goddess. So I ask that you designate a place for me to stay, in an environment sufficiently clean and remote, where I would have no need for purification rites though I always remain inside its walls.

He speaks of himself in the third person. He is aware of his duty to the world as one in charge of propagating the true philosophy of the Pythagoreans. From this letter and the above excerpt, we can see how Apollonius conceived of himself as a kind of “alternate Christ” figure and how he himself maintained this image of a reformer of mankind. Indeed, Ehrman goes on to say that Apollonius was a real person whose disciples believed Jesus to be a fraud. In the third century, Sossianus Hierocles, the Roman aristocrat who campaigned for stronger policies against the Christians, argued that the doctrines and life of Apollonius were more valuable than those of Christ and compared his

works with the miracles of Christ. This was a view held by both Voltaire and Charles Blount during the Age of Enlightenment. G.K. Chesterton, on the other, believed that the unique trial, suffering and death of Christ stood in stark opposition to the stories about Apollonius, which he felt were very likely spurious. Joseph Campbell, in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, offers a more sober view as he lists both Apollonius and Jesus as examples of individuals who shared similar hero stories, along with Krishna, Buddha, and others.

Apollonius was known in the medieval Islamic world. In the Arabic literature he appears as Balīnūs (or Abūlūniyūs) and the Arabic-speaking occultists referred to him as “Lord of the talismans” (Ṣāhib at-ṭilasmāt) relating stories about his achievements as a talisman-maker. He was appreciated as a master of alchemy and a transmitter of Hermetic knowledge. In the letter to Valerius, concerning the death of his son, Apollonius writes,

There is no such thing as death or birth nor is it correct to speak of a coming into being, except in appearance only. When a thing passes from essence into nature we say that there is birth or that it is in the process of becoming and will assume a form. In the same way we speak of death as a passage from essence back into nature; in truth no thing ever comes into being or is destroyed.

From this basic tenet of Pythagorean philosophy, he goes on to explain an essential idea of the hermetic school:

And yet both the visible and the invisible are essentially the same; they appear different because of changes in movement or state. And this change is not caused by any external factor, but is essential to a thing, and results from the division of the Whole into parts and a consequent return of the parts into the Whole, due to the fundamental unity of all that is.

And furthermore, all those who have time to meditate on the truth will respond, “Yes, since that which exists is not lost, but by virtue of its existence will live forever. Nothing is destroyed.”

There was great interest in Apollonius in Europe during the sixteenth century, but until the Age of Enlightenment he was usually treated as a magician who practiced black magic and was a great enemy of the Church who, in league with the devil, attempted to overthrow Christianity. The comparison between Apollonius and Jesus was commonplace in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and advocates of Enlightenment theories, such as deism and other anti-Church positions, saw him as a forerunner of their own ethical and religious ideas that proposed a universal, non-denominational religion that was, above all, compatible with Reason.

Despite the various and sometimes significant problems of identifying which of Apollonius’s letters are authentic and which are fabrications, it is clear that he and his letters have exerted much influence both in the Classical and the Modern world. The examples, a few of which I spoke of above, are too numerous to list in this essay, yet we will devote some time to the well-known example, among Contemporary poets, of Charles Olsen’s dramatic play on Apollonius’s life. My concern here is with the letters themselves and what they have to say about the man, Apollonius of Tyana, who lived in the second century CE and who encountered the Persian Empire and India in his many travels. In the series of letters to Euphrates Apollonius criticizes this philosopher’s way of life and in doing so offers his own life as an example. This is what he says:

Perhaps you’d like to charge me with some criminal act? I only wish you were honest and had the guts. Of course in doing so I know you would go on and on repeating the same obvious and worn-out phrases. For example, you’d say: “Apollonius never takes a shower.” And you’d be right except I never leave my house and so my feet are never dirty. “He hardly moves any part of his body.” You would be right again because I

care only for the motion of the soul. "He never cuts his hair." Of course, just as the Greek does, and the reason is that I am a Greek and not a barbarian. "He wears linen clothes." Yes, because these are the pure garments worn by priests. "He is adept in the art of divination." True, for there are many things we are ignorant of and to be able to see into the future allows us to know beforehand what is going to happen. "But such occult practices are inappropriate for a philosopher." But not for God and anyway a philosopher should aspire to such ultimate truths as only He knows. "He works miracles and heals those in physical agony and those suffering from various ailments." You could just as well charge Asclepius with the same crime. "He eats alone." That's right, and the rest of the world eats like pigs. "He rarely speaks and then only on rare occasions." Yes, I prefer to hold my tongue though there are times when I must voice my opinion. "He is a vegetarian and will not eat the flesh of animals." True, and this shows that I am humane. Now if in addition to these complaints, Euphrates, you feel there are others, let me suggest this: "If there was an opportunity, he would have accepted any money offered to him as well as precious gifts and promotions to a higher position of authority as I have done." I assure you that if I were offered any of these things, I would not have accepted them. "But surely you would have accepted honors on behalf of your fatherland." A country that is unaware of its true riches is not one's fatherland.

Apollonius does not concern himself with the motions of the material body because his concern is with the "motion of the soul," he is a vegetarian because this is "humane," and believes that the philosopher should aspire to "such ultimate truths" as only God knows. He also suggests that he is able to predict the future. In another letter to Euphrates, he writes,

The Persians have a name for divine beings; they call them magi. A magus is one who worships the gods or is by nature

himself divine. You are certainly no magus but instead like a man in the desert without God.

And furthermore, in yet another letter to Euphrates, Apollonius writes,

You say that philosophers who follow the teachings of Pythagoras practice Magic and should be called Magi, and you say the same about those who are followers of Orpheus. I believe that even those who are followers of Zeus should be called Magi, provided they comprehend the workings of Divine Law and are seekers of the truth.

Collectively, these letters suggest that Apollonius was a magician. But what kind of magician was he? In the popular imagination a magician could refer to a wizard, a sorcerer, or one who practices evil magic. In the above letter there is this word *magos*, which I have translated as *magi*, and in the previous letter there is a reference to the Persians. This suggests that Apollonius could be thinking of the Persian religious specialists known as Magians. But the Magians were a Median tribe originating in Iran who had nothing to do with magic or wizardry. The Magian faith was characterized by a belief in the principles of dualism, Ormazd and Ahriman; by a belief in the resurrection and a future life; by certain religious scruples against taking animal life, with the exception of destroying noxious animals, which was regarded as a meritorious and sacred duty. The fame of the Magi for learning and for the power of divination was widespread in antiquity. Furthermore, to complicate matters, by the first century CE, words like *magos*, *astrologos*, *mathematikos*, and *chaldaios* that were originally used to indicate, respectively, religious specialists in the Persian Empire, astrologers, astronomers, and the priests of the Esagila temple in Babylon, became interchangeable. So, when the word *magoi* is used to describe the men who came to see the baby Jesus after an astronomical observation, (Matthew 2:1) it does not mean that they are Persian religious specialists or Magians but astrologers. The leading astrologers of

Antiquity were of the Esagila, the temple of Marduk in Babylon; the Greeks usually called them Chaldaeans, but as we have seen above, this name had become synonymous with several other words. It is almost certain that Apollonius either travelled to Babylonia or otherwise had knowledge of their astrology. We know quite a lot about these officials: they made astronomical observations and were able to predict the course of the planets, observed the entrails of the victims, “read” the future from the smoke of the sacrifices, noticed what troubles were approaching, advised the authorities on the kind of sacrifices they had to bring to ward off the dangers, and they cured people with incantations and exorcisms. We can conclude that Apollonius’s concept of magic was essentially Babylonian in nature, originating with the magicians in the Persian Empire. A letter to the Priests at Delphi provides further evidence and recalls two other texts of Apollonius, *On Sacrifice* and *On Astrology*:

Priests desecrate the altar with blood, and the great masses of people are amazed, that in times of trouble, our cities are visited with plagues and other calamities, unaware that they have angered the gods in this way. How blind and stupid can they be? Even Heraclitus, with all his wisdom, could not persuade the Ephesians to purge mud with something equally filthy and to avoid using blood that carries the vital force.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, there is another letter to Euphrates that is illuminating in this context since it shows that when Apollonius is thinking of “magic” or the “magi” he is thinking of an art, that we have outlined above, that originated in the Near East. Here he criticizes Euphrates and offers an explanation of the Pythagorean way. He writes,

If any student is in a position to speak with a Pythagorean and to ask him what knowledge he will derive from studying

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2 To the Ancient Greeks, blood carried the Vital Force and Innate Heat, which powered cellular metabolism.

with him, I would tell him this: he will gain knowledge of legal matters, geometry, astronomy, mathematics, knowledge of harmony and music, and of the art of medicine, all aspects of divination, he will become like a god, and even more importantly he will learn the qualities of being generous and forgiving, his soul will become elevated, he will achieve glory, endurance, he will revere and gain direct knowledge of the gods not based on mere opinion but in fact and he will directly observe the world of daemons and not base his conclusions on mere faith, he will befriend both, realizing that in one respect both god and daemon are the same, he will derive an independence of spirit, he will learn to persist in his studies against great odds, he will be frugal, find that he can live on little but basic needs, his perception will be sharpened and quick, his movements unhindered and forceful, his body will acquire a healthy color, he will be courageous in all things, with an eye to the final goal which is immortality. Now have any of your followers, Euphrates, gained anything, such as what I have spoken of, that they could use in order to acquire knowledge of the true philosophy? I imagine that they have acquired nothing but the sight of your great wealth and that is yours alone.

There is another class of letters that concern Apollonius's moral system that is derived from his spiritual work. To his brother, Hestiaeus, he writes,

If we choose to follow the path of true philosophy, as it is the highest form of existence, then no one can say that we harbor feelings of hatred towards our neighbor, that we are intolerant or mean-spirited; and for no reason.

And in another letter to his brother he writes,

And yet you must know that a central idea of the true philosophy is to regard the entire earth as your country and all

men as your brothers and your friends, knowing they are all united under one God, that they are of one essential nature, that they speak the same language and experience the same feelings, no matter where each was born or how, whether he is barbarian or Greek, as long as he is a man aware of his true nature. But there is a bond even more essential than these truths of philosophy; it is a recognition that attracts to itself all others of the same kind.

He is critical of what he sees as the degeneration of once great cultures into cesspools of depravity. About the people of Sardis, he writes,

You grant no awards for ethical qualities, for what kind of ethical qualities do you have? But if you were to compete for the first prize in immoral acts then there could not be a winner because all of you are equally immoral. You may ask who spreads such gossip and unkind words about the people of Sardis? Well, it's the people themselves. In Sardis no man is the friend of another, and each would rather save his own ass than testify on behalf of someone falsely accused of monstrous crimes.

And in order to drive the point home he writes two shorter letters,

Even the names of your social clubs are vile like "Ass-Fuckers" and "Cock-Shavers." These are the first names that you give to your children, hoping they prove worthy of them.

So you have the names "Ass-Fuckers" and "Cock-Shavers" for the men. Now what will you call the women, your daughters and wives? For they frequent the same social clubs as you do and are also greater whores than you could ever be.

In another letter to the Ephesians, who frequent the temple of Artemis, he is critical about their lack of respect for the sacred. He writes,

You devote yourselves to the sacred rituals of the goddess and are no less devoted to the Emperor. In general, I cannot censure your custom of inviting others to the festivals as well your own commitment; but what I do condemn are all the people who day and night inhabit the shrine of the goddess, because I see thieves and criminals of all sorts issuing from the enclosed and sacred space. Your shrine has become home to sacrilegious looters and thugs who defy the Law.

And like the Ephesians, the people of Sais have also let their belief in the sacred decline into mere lip service. He writes,

Plato says, in his *Timaeus*, that you are descended from the Athenians, and though you were expelled from Attica, the goddess that you have in common with them is called Neith, whereas they call her Athena. But they are no longer true Greeks, and I will tell you why. No man who has acquired wisdom and experience through many years of disciplined work calls himself an Athenian; no Athenian ever grew a full beard, and wherever you looked, you saw that all their faces were smooth. The sweet-talkers stand before their doors, comen before their gates, pimps near the long walls, free-loaders in front of Munychia and in front of the Piraeus; and the goddess no longer has the temple at Sunium devoted to her.

And again, he writes to the people of Sardis about the impossibility of attempting to convert them to a code of morality and belief in God,

It is quite right for a traditional philosopher like myself to be somewhat anxious about visiting your city that is so ancient and has such a considerable history; and I would not have hesitated in taking on the journey if I had any hopes of success in reconciling your city to a code of morality, of respect for the laws of nature and the public sphere, and of the supreme law of God. And, in any case, I would have done

everything in my power to convert you; but infighting among the various factions is crueler than the most violent war.

In the above letters, Apollonius is critical of the moral decline into which great cultures have fallen. He sees people less concerned with the spiritual life and who base their hopes on material things. In the following letter, also to the people of Sardis, he is concerned with the once great Greek culture and what it has become. He writes,

You think you deserve to be called Greeks because of your noble heritage and because at one time there were colonies of strong men who called themselves by this name. But just as the Greeks are characterized by their customs, their laws, their common language and their private life, so too are men in general by their actions and appearance in public. But most of you no longer use your ancestral names; and on account of your recent wealth, you have abandoned the traditions of your forefathers, rejecting all links with your past glory. Therefore, these aged men who have acquired wisdom are justified in no longer greeting you even in their tombs, since they don't recognize the men you have become.

Many authors refer to Apollonius of Tyana in their works but perhaps the most sustained creative work dealing with his life is Charles Olson's play, *Apollonius of Tyana: A Dance, with Some Words, for Two Actors*, written in the summer of 1951 at Black Mountain College. Through the figure of Apollonius, Olson dramatizes his own new life, the vocational choice he had made in undertaking his modern epic poem, the Maximus poems. Tyana, the place of his origin and also a character in the play, tells how Apollonius "knows . . . that *his* job, at least, is to find out how to inform all people how best they can stick to the instant, which is both temporal and intense, which is both shape and law." Furthermore, Tyana says,

It is curious about ignorance, how it thrives — even ignorance of such a common thing, such an easily found out thing as the contours and peoples of what any of us share, the earth. Or ignorance, for that matter, of time — what has gone on in time amongst others as well as yourselves, you who have quarreled largely, have moved from civil war of farming brothers to civil war of all of us — and for what?

So Apollonius makes his way through the Mediterranean world of the first century CE, that is “already the dispersed thing the West has been since,” conducting “a wide investigation into the local, the occasional, what you might even call the ceremonial, but without ... any assurance that he knows how to make objects firm, or how firm he is.”

Being of the Pythagorean school he learns

of the ancient world disciplines for the body and its health which rested on the concept that to heal it is necessary first to know, and that to know is more than mechanics, however much any knowing of the body must rest on a complete knowledge of its behavior. It is a concept we have only known the ragged end of, and so we have doctors for the mind and doctors for the body and neither of them know what a dancer now has to know, or a composer, or a poet, if any of these latter craftsman are honestly attacking their craft.

He “is on the lookout for man, and he is already on this side of Caesarism or Christism, has found out that either of these dividings falls into ugly halves — of materialism or immortalism.” In his journeys he also learns that two ills were coming on man:

(1) unity was crowding out diversity (man was getting too multiplied to stay clear by way of the old vision of himself, the humanist one, was getting too distracted to abide in his own knowing with any of his old confidence); and (2) unity as a goal (making Rome an empire, say) had, as its intellectual pole an equally mischievous concept, that of the univer-

sal — of the “universals” as Socrates and Christ equally had laid them down. Form ... was suddenly swollen, was being taken as a thing larger a thing outside a thing above any particular, even any given man.

These issues that confronted Apollonius clearly apply to those Olsen himself was encountering at Black Mountain as he began to think about the larger work before him. After travelling to India Apollonius finally winds up in Egypt where he discovers, “a community of men who call themselves the GUMNOI, or, THE NAKEDS.” The dance has become,

a sort of happiness, a “Naked” happiness, non-interference with others, not so much ecstatic as we know ecstatic, but what ecstatic is, the discipline and joy of anyone when he or she has come to see that compulsion is no good, that nothing is so good as each allowed to be himself alone in the midst of the phenomenal world raging and yet apart. Apollonius dances in such joy, for these NAKEDS have taken up direct from energy where he believes it is, a part of the *daimonos* (which is also become a false word, but it is what Apollonius told his friend, the Roman consul Tellesinus, he knew wisdom to be, “The recognition of the daemonial nature in anything, including ourselves, and only these guileless paths give health”).

Here we recall Apollonius’s letter to Euphrates concerning the student of Pythagorean philosophy. He writes,

he will revere and gain direct knowledge of the gods not based on mere opinion but in fact and he will directly observe the world of daemons and not base his conclusions on mere faith, and he will befriend both, realizing that in one respect both god and daemon are the same.

Olsen speaks of the knowledge of “daemonic” energy, as opposed to the mechanics of knowing through repetition. He will experience things in the instant as a body moves in the dance, keenly aware of his movements and of the fact of the body not apart from the mind. In accessing this energy, the Aristotelian duality is broken, there are no “universals” as the dance is in constant change, and furthermore this energy is not an intellectual concept based on opinion but a fact. He has managed “to locate what he himself feels: that life as spirit (daemon) is in the thing, in the instant, in this man.” I can only suggest here the richness of Olson’s play as an example of a consummate work of art that makes imaginative use of the life of Apollonius of Tyana. A more extensive commentary on the play is beyond the scope of this essay. But the interested reader can go further, and by examining the letters, see the great extent to which Olson understood and appropriated the life and work of Apollonius in order to examine his own life as he began to undertake his great work, *The Maximus Poems*.

And I think it is fitting to close this essay on the letters of Apollonius of Tyana with Olsen’s own words,

He had done his work. He was near home. And with pride and ease, let the dancer go back to Tyana, let him come in slow to her as she sat at the beginning of the play, and let him come down to her, go forward into her arms, and as the lights go down, the color over the whole stage area (the known world) should first go off, color by color, and then, when the same stick of light with which the play opens is all that picks out the two of them, let that light go down ... now Apollonius’s back is to the audience, and they shape together an ambiguous, double backed thing as darkness returns and is final.

As for Apollonius’s philosophical convictions, we have an interesting, probably authentic fragment of one of his writings, *On Sacrifices*, where he expresses his view that God, who is the most beautiful being, cannot be influenced by prayers or sac-

rifices and has no wish to be worshipped by humans but can be reached by a spiritual procedure involving *nous* (intellect), because he himself is pure nous, and nous is also the greatest faculty of humankind.

**Works Cited**

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