

# The Hurtle of the Universe:

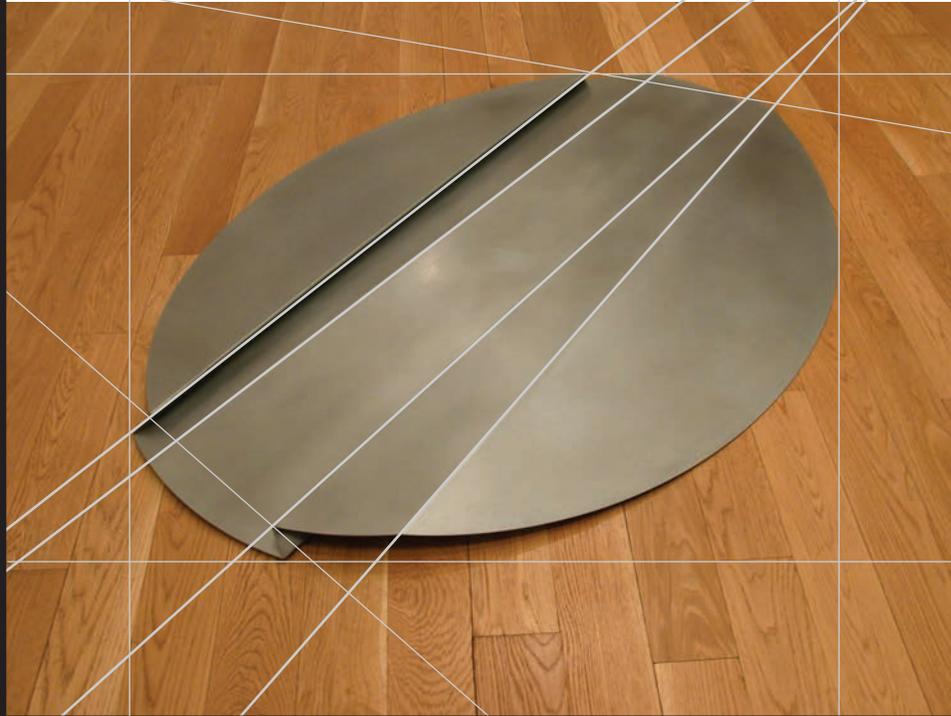
The Critique of Pure Sculpture of David Rabinowitch

by Mark Daniel Cohen

David Rabinowitch: Phantom Group

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**HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



**The Hurtle of the Universe**

**The Critique of Pure Sculpture**

**of David Rabinowitch**

**David Rabinowitch: Phantom Group**

**Peter Blum Gallery, New York**

**November 16, 2006 – January 20, 2007**

**by Mark Daniel Cohen**



Our love goes out to him and embraces him, because he did not need it. We solicitously and apologetically caress and celebrate him, because he held on his way and scorned our disapprobation. The gods love him because men hated him. “To the persevering mortal,” said Zoroaster, “the blessed Immortals are swift.”  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”



And take upon 's the mystery of things  
—*King Lear*, Act V, scene iii, 16



. . . light is the limiting condition for the mass.  
—David Rabinowitch

## I

Those who peer the deepest are opaque. Those whose gazes seek into the bottomness of things, whose fingers scratch beyond the tissues of the ordinariness, beyond the protoplasmic pleasures, past the trite despondencies, take upon themselves the dim obscurity they probe. The blackness dabs their souls; they miss the sun. They distance themselves with distances and bring us secrets that evade our sense, that knot our wits, beguile our will to emphases. Their thoughts are like the runes.

They are *sui generis*: each a model of his making; each a fashioning of his own hand. For each, there is a field of intervention that finds analogy but in the quality of uniqueness found in comparable travail. Among these few, their opacity is the only thing they share. And if they are not opaque to each other, it is through no fault of proximity, for they travel distinct trajectories and are farther from each other than is any from the horde. They move out from the norm by different vectors; like radii stemming from a center, like radiation from the leaden dullness of the core, like sparks shot out by dying embers—scintillae from the closing eye—the farther they traverse, the farther from each other they acquire.

They are, observed, in silhouette. They dwell in isolation. We do not see the world they see, we do not see the world as they. The shortcoming is ours—for they are those who peer the deepest. The shortcoming's our own.

Their blankness is no masking, their opacity no obfuscation. It is a false objection, a bristle of evasion, and it cannot be made with cogency, for obfuscation is a measure of the gap between expression and its meaning, and there is meaning here no one has yet encountered. There is no knowledge of where it lies, and how distant from the testimony it is found.

They are misunderstood, for the species has the reflex to digest, and if they are understood by each other, it is through no fault of proximity. Taken as innovators of phrasing and linguists of the imagination rather than breakthroughs of insight, as phantoms of the dive, they are accused through parochial result: their transcriptions are relayed to comprehensions in the common pool, to thoughts already thought, to common knowledge common minds demand to be confirmed, and the measures marked between what they have said and what we have to make of it. Their system of expression is their own; their uniqueness of reference refers to unique references; their cartography *Ultima Thule*. By implication, by reaction, we condemn their failure to say what we know. They are unreasonable, they do not compromise or weight received opinion. Yet they reason, they are rigorously rational, for what they wield is uncorrupted, uncontaminated potency of mind, and with thought heated to this degree, all alloys fuse—all thought is of a piece.

Their work is what we have taken to be art—the privacy of realization, the privation of common bonds. It has been art, until recently, until the turning point some decades back. We are now deep into the time of finding art not in the impulse but in the receipt, which is to say, art as a profession—art without the sense of mission internal not to its place in the social fabric as a life plan but to its intrinsic and necessitated conduct as a life commitment: art as an industry. Art has become what its recipients find it to be, and so it has become a professional classification, a field of economic endeavor—a thing responsive to marketplace demand—and has taken its place among the investments of entertainment, which is to say that it has become a sideshow for the general population as well as a financial instrument (which inevitably go together—consider how films are financed).

What art had been, what art is, and more than art, for the work of those who have made themselves opaque has not been suspended—they do not lose their nerve, they work by the resilience of insistence, without the need of approbation and beyond the discountenance of the reprove—is, at minimum, the approach of genius. It is the attack of adamant curiosity, the assault on the unknown without curtail. It is the call of personal conscience, the call demonstrably to search for truth, the truth of some matter caught by silent urge, by inkling, by the soft demand that cannot be denied. It is a vapored pressure of the self that drives the mind and acknowledges no computations of reception or renown. Its principle of operation is investigation, discovery, for when art is art, it is not invention. It sets its value, and tells us what we

do not know, but *should*. And they remain among us, inevitable as thought, discounted in the history we write, occupied otherwise, for they have courted no one.



Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

(Emerson “Self-Reliance”)

Their thought is of necessity opaque because it does not go down easily the nearly all-consuming maw of popular taste, all consuming but for this. Art when it is art sticks in the throat of the imperturbable amorphous and thus humiliates those with access to an audience and who would think of no better occupation than to feed the beast of masses and of madness who can relish nothing but the bland and to protect their careers—as if in a world in which all will die, in which love is a lie, an infantile dream, in which everything touched turns to dissipating vapors, all of life a waking from a dream, in which life makes promises, and cheats, and everything is war, they had something to lose; as if there were anything left to obtain, as if anything left to betray, and the integrity of our minds were not the only object of true significance.

Art when it is art is significant, it is indispensable, for the beast of madness is constituted when people let themselves be led like cattle, be made the reliable audience requisite for investment strategies, becoming by their authority of judgment over art the tool of an industrial machine, for any power over what one does not create is a dependency, it is a slavery, and there will be inevitably “a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf.” Art when it is art leads nothing, when like a rock it splits the flow of masses, the current of the herd instinct, and breaks the savage back. It is driven toward a polestar no one knows, and inviolable intent, the soul of independence, relentless delves like sanctity the insoluble mystery of things.

Which is to say that art is one of the natural functions of clarity of mind, one of the autonomic resorts of those who will not be forestalled and do not ask appreciation, those who seek to hear the most profound hintings of their own thoughts, who work to hear the most distant of the inner voices. It is one of the fields to which the genius within us naturally flocks. And so what we find in art is not so much aesthetics—not in the sense of a program of thought at

its essential level unique to its field of endeavor and found in no other—as the spontaneous expressive outcomes of purpose in life. It is shown to us that clarity of mind brings a superior form of existence, an elite dispensation available, as are all forms of elitism, by definition, to all those who choose to pursue it with sufficient, and that is lifelong and tireless, commitment—those who seek it above all other things. It is diagnosed as, for it is composed of, formal integrity with a purpose of functionality—thought turned through inestimable effort to accomplishment and realization in place of recognition.

For ideas are imaginative constructs of the mind. We know what things are by the principles upon which they are built, and ideas are built by the mind. It is the integrity of the idea, the coherence of its accomplishment, that requests the integrity of the manufacturing mind, and only the mind alone, the single mind left to its own resources, reliant solely upon its distinctive methods, principles of pursuit, and trust of realization, is integral. When minds are integrated in the attempt to formulate ideas, when people try to think in chorus, the result is nothing but muddle. The germinative mind is an opacity to others.

So, the mind that has become opaque possesses a protocol that is enigmatic—its points of focus, its questionings, its speculations are self-engendering. It is a species of one. Its investigations are not out of the established questions but are the inspirations of new inquiries born of new initiations, new examinations that proceed from taking nothing for granted, from going back to zero in some area of inquest, from beginning again. This is why the artist's work, the thinker's work, does not survive editing or interference, which is to say, why editors and meddlers don't survive it.

The artist, when an artist, tolerates no impositions, accepts no forced assumptions. All of civilization is his to dispose; he takes no grants of culture. He is the agar of his own, and he goes back to zero. The artist when an artist starts again.

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Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives.

(Nietzsche)

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Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.

(Emerson “Self-Reliance”)

## II

David Rabinowitch is a sculptor who is, by evidence of his work, a member of this breed of separate breeds, this family of the self-created, or, to be more precise and avoid the inevitable, intrinsic arrogance of *ad hominem* assertion, his work is a participant in their capability of discovery. His work is demanding, not merely in the sense of being advanced sculpture, of being works of art that press against the tissues of conventional practice of the art, of being formally innovative, but in the sense of being exercises in advanced thinking, of being challenging instigations to the inquisitive mind. This is to say that Rabinowitch as an artist is a thinker, a thinker in sculpture, and thus he is, by any sensible definition of the term and despite his own denials that he has “studied” philosophy, a philosopher as a sculptor: an inquirer into essential issues of existence who uses sculpture as his vehicle of inquiry and discovery.

To our misfortune, Rabinowitch is a sculptor too little known in the United States, strangely unknown. Born in Toronto, he moved to New York in 1972 and has been living and working here since. Even so, he has exhibited relatively little in this country—the majority of his exhibitions, and evidently the larger part of his reputation, has been in Europe and Canada. A contemporary of such sculptors as Judd and Serra, it is odd that his work has not been more available to us.

The last two exhibitions of Rabinowitch’s work to occur in New York, and evidently in the United States, were mounted at the Peter Blum Gallery in 2003 and 1998-99 and were exhibitions of the artist’s drawings and, in 2003, monotypes with several early sculptures. The recent exhibition, under consideration here, presented works from one of Rabinowitch’s major sculptural series and is an opportunity, for the first time in New York for some time, to observe and estimate Rabinowitch’s achievement in full force.

On display here were works of Rabinowitch’s *Phantom Group*, a series of 14 sculptures and 16 drawings done in 1967. The drawings, of course, are in support of the sculpture—plans for the articulations of those works. They are all executed on paper, using either charcoal or a variety of combinations of pencil, colored pencil, oil crayon, crayon, gouache, and gesso, and all bear the same “title”: *Untitled (Drawing for the Phantom Group)*, 1967. They range from what appear to be visual notes, the first thoughts for a structure laid out in loose assortments of a few lines, to technically accomplished, highly polished renderings of intended sculptural works.

Throughout the range of their finesse, even as recordings of compositional intentions, the drawings are striking as works in their own right. Some are so refined, they could stand as demonstrations of the methods and the value of drawing as an art in itself. They show a wide variety of the ways of combining, gravitating together, and apparently overlaying simple geometric



David Rabinowitch, *Untitled (Drawing for Phantom Group)*, 1967  
Oil crayon on paper, 21 x 14 1/2 inches

forms to achieve a harmonic balance—a variety so broad, they constitute a short encyclopedia of the strategies to achieve compositional resolution. Even at their simplest, they are compelling to witness, as if the sheer achievement of formal resolution, without further drapery of depiction to excuse the raw formal exercise, were enough to create a kind of serpent's eye: they seem, through their manner of inherent and palpable completeness, to be staring back at you, and to, thereby, transfix your gaze and hold you in astonishment, as if the promise of abstraction were finally achieved here. They are like pages from a geometrician's notebook, and they reveal why mathematicians feel that pure mathematics is an entry into and an exercise in pure beauty.

But it is the sculptures that are the point at issue. They are all low to the ground—or in the cases of the smaller works, to the platform surface—worked sheets of metal, steel and copper, and in some instances cardboard models. The sheets are cut to be flat conic sections—in essence, ovals—and in some cases, just

portions of ovals, with some of the extremities excised. The sheets have not been left flat—they have been “broken”: bent along a line to raise part of the sheet above ground level, sometimes in several steps, fold upon fold.

Occasionally, one can see the relation between specific drawings and specific sculptures—one can see some of the record of working towards the completed sculptural realization. But in all cases, the sculptures have the air of being the fruition of the line of thought, the manner of thinking, that is deposited in the drawings—like starting speculations that ultimately coalesced into tangible realities, like a promise kept. The compelling, transfixing aspect of the drawings is as heightened in the sculpture. They have the feel of essential forms, each one a single form in spite of its compositional complexity—they seem somehow realer than you, as if we were fleeting presences dancing through time, and these were that which knows nothing of the passing of ages, as if these and their like are what is left after time has eaten away all that can be deteriorated, as if the dust of mortality, of that which passes, had been blown away by the winds that turn the pages of the calendar and that billow the bane of Ozymandias, and this is what has been revealed—this is what remains. And in their purely geometric faces, in the complex, strangely right compounding of simple forms that is their form, there is something alien, something unlike us, but even so, something strangely familiar. There is a secret held within—something we were about to realize for ourselves, but have not, not yet.

But the secret is tightly held. There is an opacity of intention in these works that is impossible to miss—they carry an undeniable sense of weight and import, one has an instinctual response that there is something here, something of significance that one risks missing, and yet they are self-evidently but sheets of folded metal and board and, in the sheerly



physical sense of them, nothing more. They are the threat of abstraction fully achieved—there are no clues of meaning through depiction, no hints for the literary mind, no story; there are no literal faces, no figures, no human forms. There are just forms, with no translation grid against which to measure their implication, no concrete values to fill in the variables. And simple geometric forms are, by their nature, as deadpan as anything can be. With nothing of voiced thought appended to it, an oval is an oval.

We are told in the statement that was available in the gallery that Rabinowitch intended each work to represent a material plane of infinite extension—the conic section is to be taken as an observed portion of an endless plane, a foundation level that is not set against a background but is the background. The vertical breaking, the folding upwards of portions of these planes, is the “interior articulation” of this represented background extension—the crimp in the field.



But self-evidently, in deadpan fashion, this helps us little. To gain a better sense of the significance of these works, one needs a guideline—one needs a sense of Rabinowitch’s concerns, a sense of the field of inspiration for his art. Rabinowitch has spoken of his “overriding concern” early in his career

David Rabinowitch, *Phantom Group: Conic Plane, Elliptical, 2 Non-Parallel Double System, 2 Non-Parallel Single Systems*, 1967  
Steel with ground zinc, 2 x 7 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches (5.1 x 181.6 x 128.23 cm)

as a sculptor: “to discover a unique basis from which a fundamental critique of sculpture would follow naturally. The conscious aim was to generate works that would exemplify this critique.” The focus of his critique was the “anthropomorphic, totemic (Romantic) and painterly tendency” and the Bauhaus-tinged tendency of contemporary sculpture to be conceived “in terms of pre-planned, usually closed, factory-produced (and architecturally modelled) volumes.”

However, Rabinowitch’s critique has proved to be much more thorough than that, his artistic concerns much broader. They are philosophical and scientific. Rabinowitch has been an extensive reader of Hume and Spinoza, in particular, as well as Kant, Descartes, Leibniz, Frege, and other philosophers. He also has studied and drawn ideas from scientists, among them Einstein, Galileo, Kepler, Darwin, and more.

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In the mid-1950s, my physicist uncle gave me Einstein’s beautiful book on the special theory of relativity and the theory of gravity written for laymen. I’ve never studied anything that affected me more deeply . . . . My engagement with this book was an important factor in my giving up painting and has had a determining role in all the sculptures I’ve made.

(Rabinowitch)

Evident in Rabinowitch’s published remarks on philosophy and on science, and suggested, once the clues have been taken up, by the sculptures themselves through a clear and deliberate, deliberating focus on the most essential of formal exercises—through the care and intricacy with which so foundational a set of manipulations have been carried out, giving the works an intricacy their apparently basic means of execution belie—is the artist’s orientation on philosophical examination. These sculptures are means of investigating the questions with which philosophy is occupied. More precisely, Rabinowitch is examining the conditions of reification, the intrinsic conditions of reality, of something’s being extant.

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The motive for such reading was always and completely bound up with my desire to engage in a program of construction that was fundamental, that would expose and work directly with reality.

(Rabinowitch)

Rabinowitch's means is to work with essential components that, philosophically, straddle the divide between reality and perception, that are the preconditions—it is argued both ways—for existence *per se* and for observation, for presence in the world, ontologically, and for presence within the range of our awareness, objectively, presence as phenomena. The primary components of his artistic ruminations—the primary conditions of existence in one sense or the other—are, he has told us, gravity and perspective. Perspective is the lateral extension, the run along the floor of the steel plate, that which is to be considered a portion of what is infinite, and thus foundational. Gravity is the lift—or vice versa—the vertical structure engaged by the folding of the plate. And it should be noticed that these two terms, terms of Rabinowitch's choosing, strike to the two fields of category. Gravity is, presumably, a property of that which is, not a perceptual condition but a condition of the world as it is, as it is even when we're not looking. Perspective is a property of observation, things appear to recede to a vanishing point specified only by a specific point of view, when in fact, presumably, they do not.



Ever since I made the *Box Trough Assemblages* I've considered the field of gravity and the perspectival plane as two all-embracing, counterpart modalities essential to the construction of sculpture. That is, they are the two conditions in terms of which a sculpture must be realized if it is to provide a foundation for perception to become self-sustaining.  
(Rabinowitch)

This form of work makes Rabinowitch's sculpture, as he has acknowledged, an exercise in Constructivism—one of the movements of geometric abstraction—a practice or movement in Modernist art that dates from the early part of the twentieth century. Practiced roughly as much in sculpture as in painting (which is not the case for most modalities of abstraction, which have been largely a painter's ambition), it can be said Constructivism is to be found in the art of (working under a variety of movement titles and including predecessors as well as direct movement practitioners, and much of this is Rabinowitch's own list) such artists as Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Léger, Miro, Mondrian, Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Duchamp, Brancusi, and Giacometti, as well as Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner.

The overt purpose of Constructivism, on the part of those artists on Rabinowitch's list who practiced it knowingly, was to seek the reality of the world, to peer behind the veneer of appearances and give at least some indication of the nature of the world beyond the limits of our senses. It is one

of two principal motivations to abstract art, the other being direct emotional expressiveness, which very likely should be isolated for the most part to Action Painting—and it should be observed that the two objectives are far from mutually exclusive, Jackson Pollock being a case in point. It is broadly recognized that the invention of photography, and particularly the refinement of photography late in the nineteenth century to the point at which it started to become a hobby, the practice of it no longer limited to professionals, made the reproduction of appearances in visual art seem pointless.

Linda Dalrymple Henderson in her exceptional books *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (which is unfortunately out of print at this time) and *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works* has argued convincingly that the motivating factors were much more numerous. In the decades before World War I, a number of scientific discoveries and mathematical explorations initiated among the general public a rage of interest in the invisible reality behind apparent nature: X-rays, radioactivity, luminiferous ether, and the formulations of non-Euclidean geometry and four-dimensional geometry, particularly in the work of Henri Poincaré, which had been taken up by a number of popularizing authors, including E.A. Abbott and Charles Howard Hinton, and were common currency among a thinking lay public. Such ideas and discoveries spurred interest in the search for the invisible world and made the reproduction of appearances in art seem naïve and provincial. As Henderson has put it in an abstract for one of her papers, works as indispensable as her books, “X-ray’s proof of the inadequacy of the human eye as a perceiving instrument played a vital role in supporting artistic speculation on the possible existence of a suprasensible fourth dimension of space, to be revealed by the visionary artist.” (Her word “suprasensible” is intriguingly near Kantian terminology. And it should be added that Henderson has argued with equal conviction that the established idea of a relation between the development of abstraction and Einstein’s theories of relativity is largely fallacious—the dates simply don’t work.)

Thus, Rabinowitch’s sculptural practice fits within the tradition of Constructivism, both in its methods and its appearance, which resembles in particular Malevich and the Russian Constructivists, and in the ambition of revealing the nature of reality beyond the conditions and distortions of observation. What distinguishes Rabinowitch’s work is the weight of intellectual importing, the degree of direct influence of the specifications of established thinking, of actual ideas and focused questions. There is a literateness that can be found to the same degree in likely no other artist working today. To locate the role these ideas play in his work, one needs to turn again to the artist’s statements to receive a sense of his immediate concerns.



A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his.  
(Emerson “Self-Reliance”)

Rabinowitch has spoken on occasion of specific issues, as well as the influence of specific thinkers, that are operative in his work and that indicate the concerns at hand in it. There are three distinct structures of ideas that come up repeatedly (if any statement can be said to occur “repeatedly” in the rare published presentations of his thinking) and that are presented as determining.

### *Mathematics as a universal language*



The symbol for reference which, in these interpretations, is supplied by theoretical mechanics was from the very first exemplified by the Keplerian model but also by the dialogues of Galilei, Descartes’ algebraic transformation of geometry, and the axiomatics of Leibniz (that is, his conception of mathematics as a universal language).

I specifically use the term “abstract intuition” because the methods of mathematics have no other foundation than the absolute relations which obtain in logic, as has been elucidated in more recent years, and these, it must be conceded, are purely intuitive relations. Nevertheless, the configuration of events which was finally brought into connection with this absolute logic is at all times to be seen—by the inventor and by the community at large—as being outside of doubt. We are given, then, by the rise of mechanics a condition which unifies two polar states, that of an extreme inwardness, in all its coherence, and that of extreme actuality, in its every instance.  
(Rabinowitch)

It is clear from statements such as these that the geometric exercises of Rabinowitch’s work are explorations of the mathematical substructure that is the condition of the existence of anything, of existence itself. If it were asserted

that this thinking, and this body of work, is Platonic in a specifically limited sense—not as ascribing universal forms but as asserting the laws of geometry as the ground plane for existence—that characterization would be correct.

It is equally clear that there is in operation here an alignment, a perfect alignment, of the structural (geometric) principles of thought and the structural principles of existence. The inward and the outward are built upon the same principles. What is not clear here is the field of existence: are the laws of geometry pertinent to the world as it is, or are they pertinent to the world as we perceive it, that perception, potentially at least, being conditioned by the structural principles of thought, thus accounting for the ideal alignment? There is a similar vagueness in a number of Rabinowitch's observations, a folding together of the objective and the ontological.

### *Frege's theory of sense and reference*



My application of Frege's notion of sense and reference was twofold . . . . I identified the sense of an expression with the most clear and immediate apprehension of an element in the sculpture, i.e., the hanging member, the solid thing, a thing which has its surface coterminous with its interior. For the coordinate system, the framing device, to assume the role of symbol for the reference of the expression, it could not be constituted by a thing of immediate apprehension but only by constructed relations. The difference comes down essentially to that between mass and volume, mass being a condition of immediately perceived truth, volume being a relational circumstance whereby truth must be inferred. Thus each of the sculptures can be said to be divided into two symbolic systems, one associated with direct apprehension and clarity (sense) and one identified with the forms of indirect knowledge and stages of disclosure (reference). This exegesis only becomes applicable if each sculpture functions as a proxy for the total order of any expression whatsoever, including but not limited to art.

(Rabinowitch)

What is most likely of greatest significance in this theoretical construct for meaning is Rabinowitch's adoption of Frege's assertion of the intrinsic, objective configuration of the expression (sense) as determining its range of capable reference—not its capacity for truth value, even false assertions can

be made without hindrance, but the expression's internally specified possibility of making legitimate reference. In short, expression—and, for Rabinowitch, art—cannot legitimately be made to mean anything whatever. Its internal, factual configuration limits that to which it can be taken to refer: meaning as a function of form, and form as an intrinsic quality not interpretable, no more so than are the laws of mathematics.

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The significance of a work is the same thing as the experience of a work. I think that one reason persons seek for clues to a work is that they, perhaps unconsciously, identify the meaning of a work with its maker's intentions. This is just a confusion.  
(Rabinowitch)

*The construction of the perceptible world*

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A complete interpretation of these conditions was proposed at the end of the eighteenth century by Kant. And of course it is not by chance that he himself, before his attempt to explain the validity of scientific and mathematical judgment, was a student of physics. His explication of the role of the rational vis à vis the sensible formed the culminating synthesis of the Enlightenment. I contend that the first *Critique* is the channel, the operating link, which created the necessary initial foundation for artists to be able to imaginatively participate in the developments of modern physics in respect to those aims which are comprehended under the rubric of constructivism.  
(Rabinowitch)

Here we come to the heart of the issue of the significance for Rabinowitch of the field of experience, and the application of his asserted universals: Are they laws of the perceptually real only or laws of reality beyond perception? The world as perceived is constructed by the conditions of perception—Rabinowitch accepts Kant's analysis. There are three broad, categorically distinct approaches, or interpretations, for dealing with the implications of the constructive principle, the principle, by any specifications, of our constructing the world we perceive. What we perceive is entirely of our own making, for all intents and purposes a delusion, for it in no degree reflects the nature of things, including ourselves, as they are unto themselves. What we perceive is essentially accurate, in accord with the way things actually are, for the

structural principles of mind and the structural principles of the world are completely in accord. And what may be characterized as the Helmholtzian model: our perceptions are sufficiently in accord with the world that what we perceive is an interpretable reflection of things as they are.

It is clear from some number of statements by Rabinowitch that he holds to the Helmholtzian model. What we experience is our version of the truth of things. It is not an internally generated invention, an idealism in the purest sense, and it is not an identity with a world whose principles of construction match precisely those of our thoughts. Our perceptions are constructions reflective of ontological authenticities and can be interpreted, like scientific data that is imbued with the laboratory conditions under which it was gathered—they can be “read through.” What we encounter is a grid through which the actual world is passed, a melody inspired by things as they are, a song of it that such as we are able to sing. The world in which we find ourselves living is not the function of and the evidence for solipsism.



[Kant] proposed, as solution to the ancient problematic of the irreconcilability of interior and exterior worlds, an anthropomorphism which nevertheless provides for the objective interpretation of experience, a solution which, while—and because—it was radically anthropomorphic, was all the more able to define the limits within which human speculation would remain valid . . . . The reasons I needed to develop this no doubt must remain obscure; but during this period I was much concerned with constructive equivalents to the general problematic of solipsism.

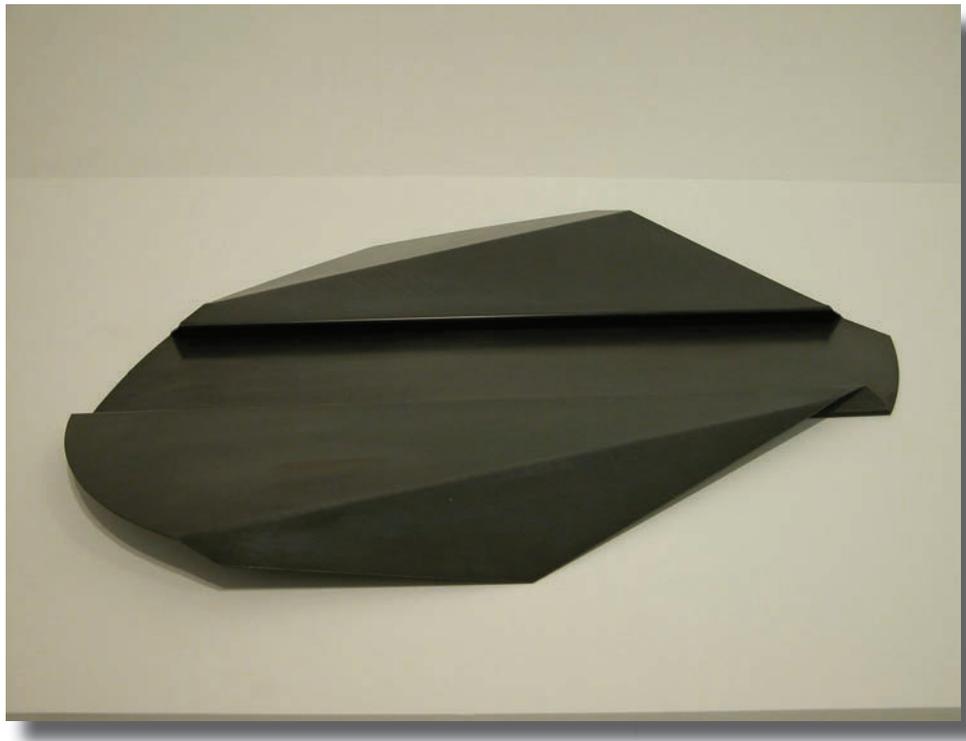
(Rabinowitch)

Hence, Rabinowitch’s project is art as a philosophical examination of the conditions of reality in a specifiable sense. The point of his focus, as he testifies to it, is not the preconditions for perception, and thus his is not a phenomenological investigation, but the preconditions of—the structural principles that function as something like natural law for—physical or objective existence. Not ontological presence but objective existence: that which is perceptible but whose characteristics are not completely attributable to and dependent on the specifications of perception but are perceptually reconfigured aspects of actuality. For him, what we perceive is self-sustaining, even if in itself, in its raw form, it is unlike what we observe.

## IV

And all of which takes us fairly far afield from folded metal sheets. And the question is forced: all of this, which has been obtained from Rabinowitch's statements on his art, gives us what? Does all of this help us to see the sculpture? Compounded, these and other of his statements constitute his theory of his own

sculpture, but do we encounter a body of sculpture that "speaks," and does the theory help us to "hear" it? Do the sculptural works of Rabinowitch in themselves have a meaning in the sense he developed out of Frege—as a "reference" rooted in but outside of the intrinsic physical characteristics of the sculptures as objects?



I have never made works in terms of sculptural challenges or solutions to problems.  
(Rabinowitch)

What Rabinowitch's statements constitute is a theory that serves as a compositional strategy. These are the thoughts that, by his report, motivated him in the making of the works, they prompted him to create the works we received in exhibition. But a compositional strategy, the thoughts that get the thing done, is not the same as a thematic strategy, a set of tactics for infusing works of art with detectible meaning, meaning detectible by the sensitive observer, detectible without the aid of anything extrinsic to the works themselves, including the verbal guidance of the maker. And as Rabinowitch has noted, to identify the meaning of a work with its maker's intentions is "just a confusion."

David Rabinowitch, *Large Model for Phantom Group*, 1967  
Copper with cold patina, 1 3/4 x 23 1/2 x 28 inches

What we have in these works is not sculpture in the traditional sense of the word, for they are not specifically art in the traditional sense of the word, but meditative objects—intellectual objects that are the results of deep contemplation. Perhaps akin to proposed results of scientific experiments yet to be made, or yet to be capable of being made, Rabinowitch's sculptures are less like works by Rodin, or even David Smith, than they are like Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913-14, in which Duchamp simulated the appearance of a meter-long stick distorted by four-dimensional space—a visual object lesson of advanced thought, and an experiment that of course could not be truly conducted. Rabinowitch's works are, in a sense, the remains of meditations conducted through the manipulation of objects, through the manipulations involved in their making. They are aftermath. They recall the exploration that was made possible through their being made, but only for he who was there for the exploration.

Yet, for the rest of us, they are infused with meaning, or the potential for meaning, at the least. It is not, in the traditional sense, aesthetic meaning—it is a rather more intellectual matter. But what of that? They are deeply intelligent, or they bespeak a deep intelligence, that which was brought to their fashioning, and what manner of criticality can bring that capability into doubt?

They are calls to meditate, by their nature and by the nature of their creation—they are self-evidently so. And they possess a valency, they are vectored, they direct the dreaming mind to speculations along the lines of those that brought them into existence. There is a mystery in this, but what of that? For the greater field of interest is to follow their lead, to dream out of them and away from them, and that is a direct contact with the sculpture and not with reports of their creation.



But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather, not that I believe it, but that I believe it . . . I trust I make myself obscure?  
(Robert Bolt, "A Man for all Seasons")

So, let us dream with them, and begin with their observation. The metal plates have a clean, sleek, polished appearance. Fold upon fold, they are layered in their look with an evacuation of the signs of decay. They are pristine to the gaze—there are no signs of rust, no marks, no wear, nothing of deterioration. They are sheathed the veneer of agelessness, and it seems the agelessness, the unageing validity, of the precision of their geometry—the mathematical clarity that does not take the marks of time, that does not credit any moment of existence, that does not grow or fall to the sere, the yellow leaf.

And there is a beauty to this precision, to these affections of clean, unbending lines and smooth curves, to this mathematical simplicity. There is a charm in the regularities, a spell in the rhythms of level upon level and the rippling of segment upon segment, in the harmonics of their resolutions in the completion or the promise of completion in the elliptical curve, in a set of lines not quite parallel mirrored by an adjacent set of lines not quite parallel. They are nearly harmonies, and one can almost hear the crystal *ping*, the perfect tone arising from the fillip of the goblet, from the perfectly cut, geometrically resolved carve of the glass.

Purely abstract, purely mathematical formulations—and there seems something intimately entrancing in them, something interior, something deeply human. But well there should. For we are more than feelings, we are as much and as intimately our minds—and thinking is as much a song as singing, and profundity of thought a symphony. And what could be more human than music—the completely abstract, thoroughly mathematical art? This, too, is us.

And there is more to this. There are suggestions of possibilities, potentially scientific conceptions, for these meditative works grew by means of scientific thoughts, and in some way they carry the tone, the pitch of their making. There are hints here, spurs to imaginings, of an altered worldview, of a different vision of things.

The layering of horizontal levels in these works has the appearance of ascending planes of light. Even more precisely, in their sheen and in the shimmer of the polished surfaces, in the swift smoothness of the laterals, there is the visual feel of their being rays of pure light, illumination shunting down their lengths. The exacting straightness of the lines and the gleam of their surfaces give the sense of sheer velocity, of rushing, vectored speed. And in art, straight lines are always the visual formula for rapid motion.

But there is no motion here, no sense of motion to the visual conception. There is the feeling of velocity, but it is speed that stands in place, velocity that has no movement, that has no rate of speed, that is immeasurable as movement. Less than motion, it is more like a tension, like a pressure, like an energy field, like a standing wave through which water pours but which never moves, and never falls, more like a grip—an impossible conception, but what we see, as palpable as light.

And one might speculate. Under Einstein's theories of relativity, all motion is relative to the point of observation except, unlike Newton, that of light, the speed of which is invariant. Light measures out at the same speed for all observers, regardless of their velocity relative to each other or to anything else they observe. The speed of light is a constant, a universal, a non-additive degree of motion.

It can be argued that background conditions possess, as their defining characteristic, the same apparent qualities from the viewpoints of all emergent properties. They are the unchanging conditions, and all unchanging conditions are background conditions. Whereas not discretionary or interpreted, background conditions and emergent properties may well be perspectival—each from its viewpoint may witness the other as background. Even if so, they are, as are all essential dichotomies, a matched pair. Each is the precondition for the other. Given changing conditions of any kind, there will always be an unchanging background, and whatever is unchanging always is background.

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. . . a vision of articulation in an extension equally expressed as external and internal relations, all having necessary relations to a base plane identified with any observer's base.

(Rabinowitch)

*What if*—we conceive of light not as moving at a universal speed but, since movement is a relative concept—with two things moving past each other, either can be designated as stationary—we conceive of ourselves as moving relative to light? Light then is universally unchanging, since it is equally and currently conceived as universally of constant speed for all observers—it is then stationary for all observers. Light then becomes the background for all else, all that changes, all that is not light. Light becomes the background for change, the reference plane—the Being for Becoming.

*If so*—then the geometric simplicity, the harmonic resolution of form, becomes the mark of background, of the unchanging condition, of the agelessness of the math. As things become geometrically more complex, as we degrade from the smooth precision of simple forms, from the perfect balance of them, we slow from light—or, attributing the movement to us, we speed away from it, we rush into change. The light appears rapid to us as we deteriorate into complexity of form, and it is complexity that seems to congeal into the seeming solidity of a stop against the seeming movement of the background—into the supposition that it is light that moves away from us, that it is light that changes.

*If so*—then the background condition of all that is, the precondition of it existing at all, is the hurtle of the universe, the universal pure velocity standing in place, what appears to us as light, as the constant and universal motion, but the motion is ours. The background of the universe, the givens, are then not space and not time, not the elements of the Transcendental Idealism, not as givens in reality and not as universals in our perceptions—for this, then, is what Rabinowitch's work is showing us. In it, we see the background condition as light, as velocity that does not move, that does not traverse space, that

does not transpire in time, velocity that just is—velocity *per se*, the universal condition of existence. All else, as foreground against light, against this limiting condition, against this universal pertinence, is a slowing into geometric complexity, into tangible existence, into the object. But the slowing is an increasing rush away from the essential.

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The surface is crucial to a work's viability but only in the context of the whole. It should not be judged as a separate state. Perhaps this will be seen clearly if we ask ourselves, for example, to separate out the tone of Heifetz's *Del Jesu* while he is performing the Chaconne. This will quite miss the point of the music.

(Rabinowitch)

**V**

But then, this is just a thought, daydreaming off a shining polished surface. And it may well be nothing more than a mild self-hypnosis—to look at a folded metal plate and see whatever one is inclined to see—just a song one sings to oneself. But ideas begin this way. Before they are put to the rigor that justifies assertion, ideas are the free play of imagination, things we toy with to see where they go, what they will do. And they want a certain absurdity, for otherwise they have stepped away from nothing already known, and they can hold no promise. They want a certain opacity, a certain residence in silence, an incomprehensibility from the viewpoint of the already emerged properties of the mind, else they cannot be pregnant with chance.

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Music has been and is of the deepest importance in my life but it is impossible for me to speak of a direct musical influence in any work I've done. I happen to be at this time working on a construction using film, music and silence.

(Rabinowitch)

And these speculations, and any others that from anyone else similarly arise, are rooted in the hard intellectual labor of Rabinowitch: the background conditions of his sculpture. His works have no ready lexicon, no established code by which they can be read, they do not resort to the available legend of traditional art, but they are rich with the workings of his thinking for a sensitive eye of another kind, perhaps an unknown kind—an eye that dwells in isolation,

that is the model of its own making, that remains open. There is a ready audience for Rabinowitch's art, a set of eyes prepared by their solitude for his hermetic realizations. Perhaps they are unlike him, but they are like his works, and apt to envision with them. Such visionaries know, in the face of the facts—that people die, that love is impossible, that there are no simple pleasures and all is battle and duress—that there is art, and knowledge: as appropriate a recess for adoration as is virtue. Such visionaries are as often as not despised by others, but through no fault of proximity, they are uniquely capable of seeing each other. And to them comes the light, the limiting condition, as it becomes the greatest profundity of all, as it becomes the music, as it becomes the silence.

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We may be sceptical of the world's intervals and distances, of its sizes and scales, of its solidities and motions—even of its causalities. This is not, however, because the world is not there, but because it is. In Rabinowitch's *Metrical Constructions*, our pace of the world is the music of the spheres. The rest is sophistry.

(Whitney Davis, *Pacing the World: Construction in the Sculpture of David Rabinowitch*)

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My ethic would be this, increasingly to take away from man his generic character and to particularize him, to make him to a greater degree incomprehensible to others.

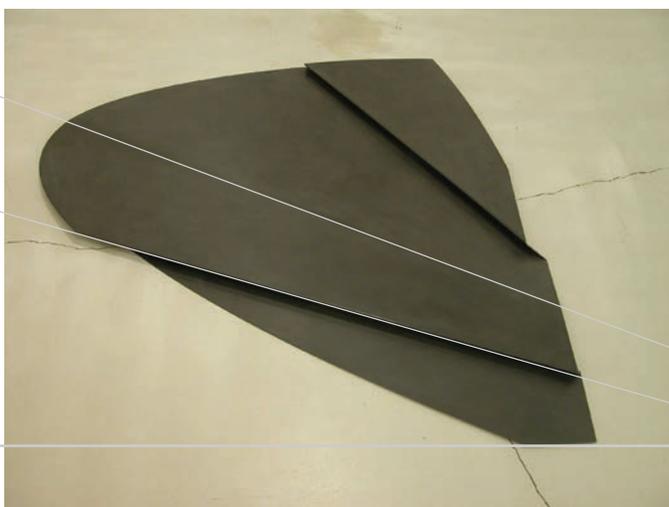
(Nietzsche)

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Ohne Musik wäre das Leben ein Irrtum.

(Nietzsche)

David Rabinowitch, *Phantom Group: Open Conic Plane, 2 Non-Parallel Double Systems, 1 Non-Parallel Single System*, 1967  
Steel with patina'd zinc, 2 x 67 1/2 x 51 inches (5.1 x 171.5 x 129.5 cm)



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# The Dynamism of the Beautiful

by Mark Daniel Cohen

*Joseph Raffael*

*Hyperion*, Volume II, issue 3, October 2007

HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS



*The Dynamism  
of the Beautiful*

**Joseph Raffael**  
**Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York**  
**October 20 – November 28, 2007**

**by Mark Daniel Cohen**

**B**eauty's the hermetic cell of thought. It is the chamber made for dreaming minds, for ruminative ease, for inward turns that laze into the comfort of implausibles of possibility—for the meditative pleasure of the eye. The air of it is rare, the speculation braced, the circle of its charm the carved perimeters of grace: a haven that is respite from the blazing of the world. Like a breath held, a moment into hold, a time that's stalled of time, to attend to the enthrallments of the thought and the ceremony of awareness: the ballet of the liling of the mind, the drifting of the senses, the formulated dripping of the sensuously through. Only computations know this false, but geometers are true, for the transformations born upon the imprint of the glass, like Stevens' jar of Tennessee, augment the fall of lines and the intensities of shades. The world surrounds the dreaming mind, but for the dreaming mind. And arcs of glass, it magnifies, and haunts the gaze with hidden waves, and movements on a curve's a fall of grace: a comportment of the mind, a posture of the seeing soul, a dignity within—the personal of self composed as style.

Within the districts of contemporary art, there is nothing so beautiful as the art of Joseph Raffael. There are no other contenders in the face of his continuing achievement. In exhibition after exhibition, Raffael demonstrates, like the master of the art that he is, the sheer entrancing beauty that can be achieved through the use of watercolors—his exclusive medium. In exhibition after exhibition, Raffael displays monumental executions of delicacy and dexterity that seem to defy the possibilities of the medium, to prove, like the master of the art that he is, that our expectations of the limitations of the medium are naïve, that only someone who has devoted his life to learning the ways of a knowledge and a practice can show us what is possible. And in exhibition after exhibition, Raffael tells us, like the master of the art that he is, that beauty may be easily spoken of and theorized about, but like all things too easily transposed into theory, the truth of them is clear only upon direct encounter. To know what beauty is, we must drench ourselves in the beautiful, and that requires a Raffael.

And it requires a Raffael to show us that beauty prevails, and to show us the ways in which it prevails, even as it is brought into question by minds that think where they should feel, that theorize where they should wonder, and submerge, and take note. Beauty is much under question now, and is easily questioned when one only thinks about it. It is no longer much the objective of contemporary artists, and has not been for decades, for long ago visual art turned largely to the cleverness of the implied concept in place of the captivation of the visual imagination—to the literary imagination stoked by the

visual presentation. Beauty has come to be viewed as the result of convention, as determined by cultural specifications, as a product of inurement—we are captured by the shimmering glow of what our culture instructs us should be seen as shimmering and glowing. And at its worst, until worse comes, beauty is taken to be a Trojan Horse—the glittering wrapper, the gaudy drapery, within which is carried the prevailing ideology, sold us by the dazzle of the packaging, carried like an infection to the depths of the pretty tissue.

To doubt beauty in this way is to make it a function of something else—of culture, of ideology, of salesmanship. It is to make beauty an aspect, an attribute, an adjective—the beautiful—rather than a noun. It is to doubt that beauty is something in itself—that beauty is. If there is an issue regarding beauty, then it is a personal matter with regard to Raffael, for his work is the focus of the issue in our time, his work is the heart of the issue. To doubt beauty, even to doubt its appropriateness of place in contemporary art, one must doubt what he does—in exhibition after exhibition.

The current exhibition is as much to the point—to his point. It is, again, what we expect to see, and for those of us fortunate enough to know his work, work that is far from known well enough around the world, what we depend on seeing from him. The exhibition is intended to comprise 15 paintings, the brunt of the work done by Raffael since 2005, the year of his last exhibition at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery—all done in watercolor on paper, all of astonishing scale, considering the medium, the largest of them measuring 85 inches wide. (This essay is being written in advance of the exhibition, after the author was permitted to view the works at length.) And they are all depictions of nature scenes, as is typical of Raffael. But there has been a shift in the orientation, a shift that began in the midst of the work for the 2005 exhibition, for which this author wrote the catalogue essay, and is fully realized here. Many of the precise subjects are the same as they were prior to 2005—there remains a devotion to floral painting, to the intricately noted details of blossoms, and to observing birds sitting on branches. But otherwise, where there was previously a tendency to see serene moments in nature—fields of fallen leaves, lilies lying on the surfaces of ponds, spreading trees—now there is a penchant for the animated in place of the placid, now there are fish swimming beneath the surface of the waters and rising above it, and the birds are more alert, more active, more agitated. And there is something else, something else that is different, more active, more agitated, more energized.

Raffael's watercolors continue to have every signature element of his style. They are glistening, intricate, limpid renderings of nature, gem-like in the purity and brilliance of their colors, deeply intimate in the complexity of detail that is never falsified, that is rendered with all the specificity that exists in nature. Look at *Autumn II*, 2006, and *Another Spring*, 2006—two large images of trees in full foliage in which every leaf is present. In the past, Raffael has

employed the effect of an impossible depth of field—he showed us receding vistas in which everything, regardless of its apparent distance from the observer, remained in perfect focus. It is an implausible form of vision—literally impossible for the human eye—and although there are no deep vistas here, the effect of his intricacy of detail remains the same. These images may seem like re-creations of normal sight, but they are not. This is visionary, for no ordinary mortal sees like this.

And there remains the ideal fusion of technique and subject matter, the simultaneity of the image of nature in its every detail and the brush stroke, the spread and infiltration of the watercolor applied, to some degree, wet on wet, the slight migration of pigment to the edges of the stroke. The scene and the technique become, everywhere, one and the same. Raffael's manner of applying watercolors to the paper is ideally attuned to what he is painting, as if the manner and the matter were one, as if paint and leaf and petal and feather and bark were indistinguishable by nature—as if he painted with the movements of nature, painted with nature itself.

What is new here, what has blossomed since Raffael's last New York exhibition, is a dynamism, a sheer energy that his images did not have before, that his style did not have before. There has been for many years a certain placidity to Raffael's images, a certain calm and easiness to the tonality of the renderings. In much of his subject matter, it was as if nature had sat for her portrait. In all their intricacy, fallen leaves laid in their fields, forest vistas stood with an august dignity against the air, flowers arose in their vases and turned their best face. There was an air of deep mystery about it all, and a sense of waiting on the part of the nature scenes and the viewer, as if holding one's breath for a realization about to occur. All seemed to be waiting, attentive and alert. And the manner of painting suited the tone—the sureness of touch and application of watercolor carried through the calm sureness of the imagery. All waited to have its secret revealed, and it waited with assurance.

Now, there is an energy to the painting and to what has been painted. The brush strokes have an eddying fluidity and a sinuous swiftness of movement that seems inimical to a medium so delicate and requiring such sureness of hand, a medium so unforgiving of errors of touch and physical judgment—and would be at odds with the medium if executed by a hand less sure than Raffael's, by the hand of someone less than a master. The backgrounds begin to break up into abstract patterns of movement and color, of swirl and hue, the limitlessly distant depth of field in the receding forest is often gone, and jewel-like brilliancies of color have taken its place. The colors have become somehow denser. They appear to have been ramped up not only in hue and value but in intensity—Albers' third quality of color, other than its place on the color wheel (hue) and its gauge from light to dark (value)—the sheer glowing potency of the colors seems to have been amplified, as if they are now what



Joseph Raffael, *Spirit*, 2006  
Watercolor on paper, 60 x 85 inches

they have always been, only much more so, as if they were more themselves, to a degree ultimately blinding.

There is a shiver to it all, a vibrancy, a universal vibration, or set of vibrations, running through everything that greets the eye. There is a tension of explosive power. The aptness of technique to content, of the

means of rendering to that which is rendered, continues, and both have been amplified. As the colors detonate in the vision, as the strokes assault the senses, senses beyond just the visual—you can feel these paintings along the spine—the birds on their branches pulse and resonate, bristle and raise up their wings like a snarl, or an astonishment. Flowers seem to erupt like novae in the distance of space. Autumn leaves spill and pour around the tree branches like a maelstrom. Fish break the surface of waters like geysers. And flowers seem not illuminated but coalesced of light, going to white-out at their points of greatest, thickest physical density, where their petals are most material.

Consider just a few of the paintings in this exhibition. *Spirit*, 2006, is a scene of a pond filled with fish, comparable to several Raffael has painted in the past but far more activated than before. The fish break surface everywhere, as if spawned of paint, and a clouded sky is reflected in the surface of the water, letting through a partially washed out vision of what's below, as if the immensity of the atmosphere had been poured into the pond. Rippling networks the surface of the painting, capturing and dispensing light reflections from the sky, integrating earth and the heavens, water and the light, above and below, and integrating with itself to constitute the real subject matter of the painting—a field of pulsation that only incidentally and surreptitiously testifies to living beings in their environment, living out their lives. Where the paper crinkles—one of the inevitable effects of the employment of watercolor, and so an effect to be turned to effect, for craft is the use of inevitability to a purpose—the apparent fish of the depiction flutter with the wavering of the

water they appear to swim beneath. It is all controlled, and it seems all barely controlled, and it is all of a piece—all a field of energy captivated.

*Emergence*, 2006, is a portrait of a single flower set against an abstract background of roiling strokes of pure color. And the active principle of the strokes of the background is the active principle of the strokes of the entire work—it all boils before the eyes. And the flower itself is nothing sedate, nothing sentimental. The color of it seems to stream from the center of its self, and at the point of its birth, at the point where the petals emerge from the stem, there is a volcanic explosion of incandescence, a star burst of light, the limiting condition of the real, pouring out into the living presence of the floral burst. Aptly titled, this is not a portrait of a flower, but of the very principle of emergence, the very quality of growth—something serenely accepted by us and all but incomprehensible the moment we consider it—observed in the natural setting all around us, observable everywhere.

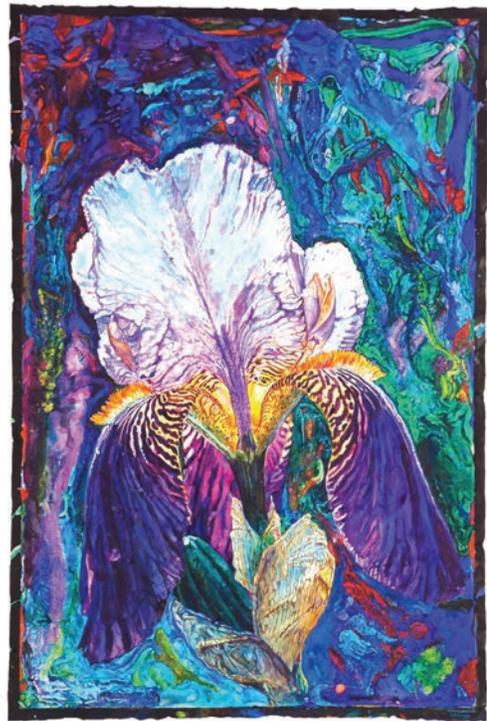


This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,  
Cut stems struggling to put down feet,  
What saint strained so much,  
Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,  
In my veins, in my bones I feel it —  
The small waters seeping upward,  
The tight grains parting at last.  
When sprouts break out,  
Slippery as fish,  
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.

(Theodore Roethke, "Cuttings (later)")

There is in all this a lesson about beauty's nature. Beauty is not a felicity to the eye, not an agreeability honed unto delight, not a portioning of pleasure, not as pleasure is conceived to be the quality of what we hope to have from the affections that we find in life. That is not what affection, not what art, and not what beauty are about. That remuneration of the spirit, that recuperation offered to a lack, has no bearing on the thing. It is too much a fantasy consecration of the truth to our centrality, to the answering of our needs. Our needs count for nothing in this field—we are not the foundation, we are not the reason.





Joseph Raffael, *Renaissance 2007, 2007*  
Watercolor on paper, 63 x 44 1/2 inches

Beauty is the vitality, for beauty is the vision heightened, amplified to recognize a nearly violently creative creation, an eruptive growth of field, a detonating field of growth. And underlying it, a principle of formulation that dwarfs our being and our needs, a principle whose scale cannot accommodate our diminutive stance. Beauty forms to galaxies as much as to the buds, as much as to a woman's breast, as much as to a man's Blakean fist.

Susan Sontag once observed that "every style is a means of insisting on something." Raffael's style has become one of pure insistence, a forceful pronouncement in liquid hues and the seeming tentative of paper of what he has observed, and what he keeps observing—of what we need to see. His insistence is palpable. It ripples like waves, it hums like visible oscillations, it silently howls like wind. It blazes like light.

And what we see, what we are shown, and what we learn, is that beauty is the potency, the power, the electricity of life. And not just life, for the energy of vision runs through everything we see. The beauty of these works is the dynamism of the field, a field like a single pool of water glistening across the surface of a painting. It is the vision of the vitality of existence, the ardor of the real. One can see it clearly in a work such as *Renaissance 2007, 2007*. Consider it—a painting of a parrot on a tree branch, but hardly that. The parrot raises its wings as if alarmed, and it stands against a background that should be forest but is instead a seething expanse of abstract form—colors in hallucination, hues that chime like a welter of the bells. And the wings of the parrot, raised in awareness, lifted in alert, blend into the background—it is impossible to find their edges, to see where they leave off and the background fills in. The parrot is visually emerging from the field—this, too, an emergence. It arises from the welter, the welter into which it eventually will submerge, as will we. All is of a piece, and the severe depth of field Raffael has used in the past, to fuse together foreground and background, has become a universal extension of pulsating energy.

As much is true of the more sedate, of the flowers in their vases, of the heaps of fallen leaves from years ago—of the stabilized of form and formed to wait. Even the still of vista and still life gives form that is the bristling of mere fact, of fact not so mere. The stabilization of sheer factuality, of static, modeled form, has always been sheer force of Being—Being as a dynamism of the power to sustain itself. For form is not just form, not just inert. It fills in from behind.

Presence itself, maintained moment after moment, is itself an insistence, a style, a formulation that does not lie still but is re-created, moment after moment, by the streaming force of Being, the power reconfiguring in constant push to be. The need to see the pulse of energy on the surface of the work is precisely that—a need. And it is a literal-mindedness, as if one could not conceive of that which is implicit. And the counter-argument is circular: if Being, that which is, is just inert, just is, it is sustained by what? On what does it reside?

Which is to say the nature of beauty in Raffael's work has not changed, for beauty of this hue was always there. The vehicle of its delivery to our eyes has been augmented by the artist, but the point remains the same. It fills in from behind. If the dynamic of beauty were something new, if it had not been before us all along, it would be mere therapy—a reconfiguration of the receiving sense, its only result the petty remuneration of the perceiving soul, a vision solely for the sake of the reconditioning of our senses. But if it is a fact of things, then it always was, and a hand and eye so keen as Raffael's have always given us the view.

This is, of course, the Dionysian—the active agency of churning fields, the raw fecundity, the generative seething, from which the reification of the tangibly formulated must arise, into which it must be subsumed, of which, in the final assessment, it always is. And what we find in Raffael is that the formless dynamism of the Dionysian and the beautiful form of the Apollinian were never parted, never simple alternatives. They are a matched pair, as are all dichotomies, inseparable, each inconceivable without the other, each impossible alone—as impossible of division as the opposing poles of a magnet, for if they were separated, there would be no magnet, there never would have been. Opposite ends of any spectrum infiltrate each other. They are intricately. And the beautiful image is animated by the power that sustains it, even if that animation is, for a time, its stable, constant, vibratory re-creation, pronouncing it through time.

But it is we who conceive the re-creation; it is we who note the spectral separations, flaming like a galaxy of gems. And beauty is a vision, a way we see the constant reformulation of change—one of the ways we see. It is a clarity of vision, an eye rising above the waters, a capability of sight rinsed clean, a comprehension of what we cannot conceive. It is a grace of visibility.

And as the encountering of art is a psychological event, as psychology is anterior to aesthetics, beauty is an event of life—a moment in the mind. The vision of beauty is vigor answering to vigor—nowhere a need—in fact a reconfiguration of the self in a response to its like, responding to the sustaining power of the real. And so, beauty is not a recompense, not an answer to the faltering of humankind before the truth of things. It takes upon itself its

opposite. It embraces the change of rise and decay. It incorporates all that we must confront. It embodies the whole of life. And the vigor of it as a vision is a strength, a strength drawn from the force of its insistence, the potency of its style, the indelibility of its form. And as all fear is ultimately the same fear, all strength is the same strength: the strength to exist, to be, to confront all the aspects of existence, without the need of fantasies, without the flinch before the facts—the endpoint of self-betrayal. Beauty is the courage to live.

And so beauty is the fracture in the glass—the swarming inchoate showing through, welling up from behind, forming and fortifying the vision. It is a vision that has gone beyond the perfect to embrace the flaw, to encompass the crack in the veneer, and we have long known that beauty is the proper portion of the broken hearted—it is strictly they who know its worth, it is they for whom the enhancement past perfection can be cherished. This is what Raffael shows us, what he was born to show us, so deeply of his own nature is his vision. In his indispensable art we see the cracked surface of nature that is nature whole, the riven heart of the world that is the world vibrant and teeming with life, the energy of creation that is the only fact of nature we will ever be. In the compass of his art, in the braced and tempered serenity of his atmosphere, the speculative mind is hastened to freedom, and the blazing of the real is in-folded into grace. In the compass of his art, the broken heart of beauty finds the rose. And in the compass of his art, those who know the damage that endows are made whole again.

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Of this foundation of all existence—the Dionysian basic ground of the world—not one whit more may enter the consciousness of the human individual than can be overcome again by this Apollinian power of transfiguration. Thus these two art drives must unfold their powers in a strict proportion, according to the law of eternal justice.

(Nietzsche)

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The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air.

(Wallace Stevens, from “Anecdote of the Jar”)

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# Wrestling with Nature:

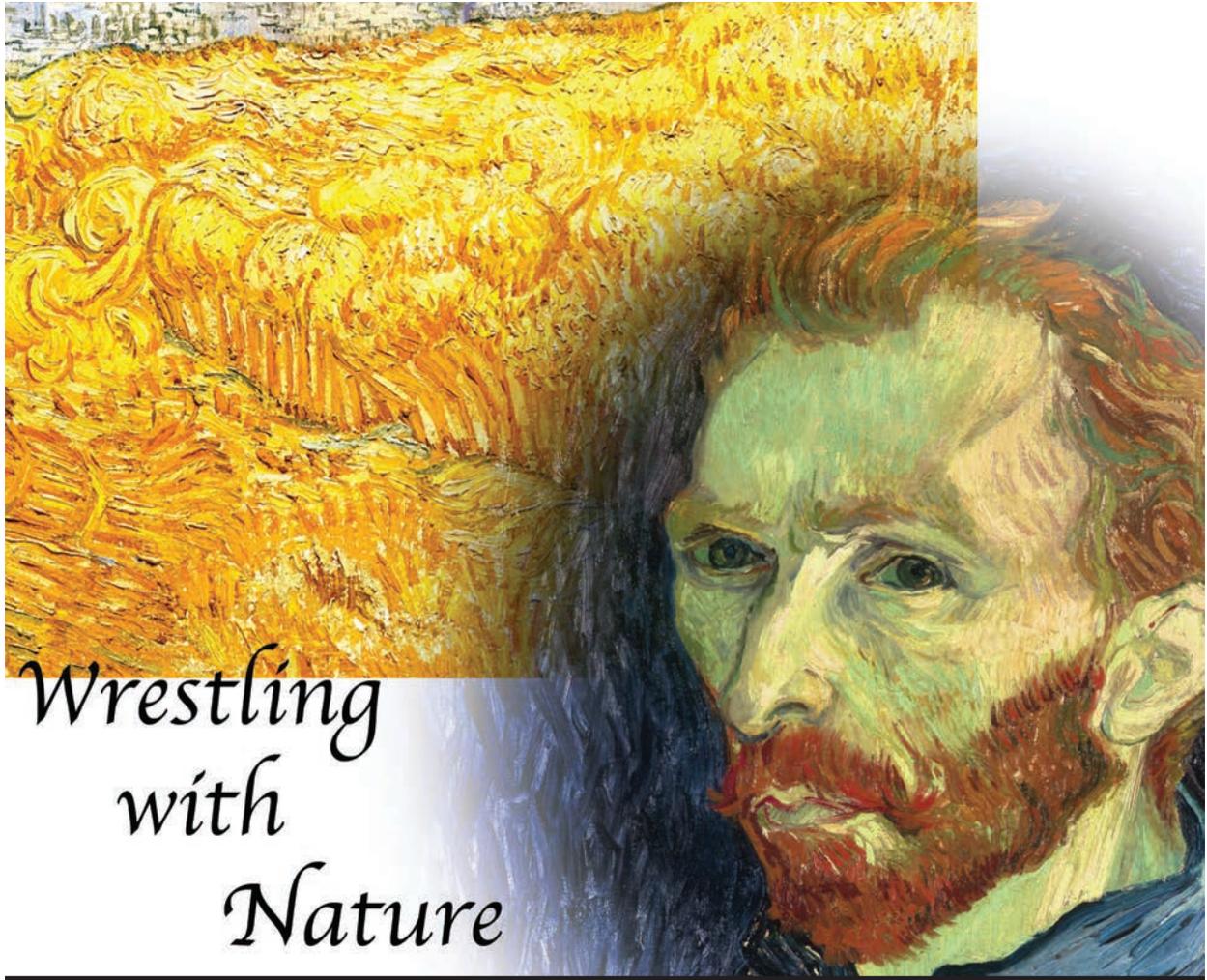
The Obscuring Mirror and the Dream of True Perception

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Van Gogh and Expressionism

*Hyperion*, Volume II, issue 3, October 2007

**HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



*The Obscuring Mirror  
& The Dream of True Perception*

**Van Gogh and Expressionism  
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**by Rainer J. Hanshe**

“ Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
My services are bound.  
—Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.2.1-2

“ To be one with all living things, to return,  
by a radiant self-forgetting, to the All of Nature.  
—Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles*

“ I suddenly woke up in the midst of this dream,  
but only to the consciousness that I am dreaming  
and that I *must* go on dreaming lest I perish . . .  
What is “appearance” for me now! Certainly not the  
opposite of some essence . . . Appearance is for me  
that which lives and is effective . . . among all these  
dreamers, I, too, the “knower,” am dancing my dance  
—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

“ When I dream and invent without return, am I not . . . *nature*?  
—Valery

**T**o see or not to see—that is, to lift or not to lift the veil, is not that the question?

“*Phusis kruptesthai philei*,” said Heraclitus, and ever since, his enigmatic statement has been malformed, interpreted and transfigured throughout time. Theologians, philosophers and artists have utilized it to shape our perception of and relationship to nature. In this, are we not shaping our relationship to our selves—and we are a multiplicity of warring, separated selves and not a singularity? For in coming to know nature, however much we are at all capable of knowing that which hides or disappears as it appears, what is it that we are beginning to discern, or *interpret*, but our very own lives? The mirror we are gazing into though is not transparent, but obscured, just as the eye of the camera is not lucid but darkened glass; it is not objective for never is there *only* the eye of the camera—behind that Cyclopean eye there is

always another eye, and that too is a single eye. Distortion abounds; darkness proliferates. Ascend, descend, traverse and pursue, what is there but cave within cave and ground behind ground. Our record of the world, though we think it true or factual, is but a phantasm, flickering images appearing on the screen of life, this dream that is a cinema. There is no true world—what would a ‘true’ world be anyhow?—only perspectives of a world that we will never know. The world just is what it is; it is beyond truth and falsity. “Appearance,” Nietzsche realized, “*is reality*”; it “resists any transformation into an imaginary ‘true world.’” If truth does not exist, art is worth more than truth, for through its generation of appearances, it is more akin to becoming, a reflection of the unfolding film in which we participate, each of us splintered by light, coming to fruition through decay. It is a reflection that does not purport to possess irrefutable clarity; it knows that its vision is full of obscurities. Thus, to love our illusions, knowing all the while that they are illusions and nothing more, is to remain cognizant of our ultimate *anopsia*. But we are deceived both by our illusions—they are seductive and powerful—and by what we think are truths—they are tricky and also seductive—, what we think we discover objectively, for as much as it blesses us, the sun blinds, and as much as they provoke thought, the stars mystify. Our clarity is our encompassing darkness. The veils of Isis conceal but more and more veils—few can plummet into the abyss from the bewildering dizziness of vertigo and laugh. For all your ills, said Rabelais, and consciousness is an ill, I give you *laughter*. . .



Oh, my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter—and now a thirst gnaws at me, a yearning, that will never be stilled.

My yearning for this laughter gnaws at me: oh how can I bear to go on living! And how could I bear to die right now!—

(Nietzsche—*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

In outlining a moral code for psychologists Nietzsche warns against observing merely “*for the sake of observing!* That,” he declares, “produces a false perspective, a squint, something forced and exaggerated.” The ‘psychologist’ who presumes that he sees more clearly because he is not directly involved in what is being experienced, that his perspective is *purser*, which is to say, *disinterested*, is deluded. One is always interested, one is always involved; there is no detached observation as there is no detached creation. The move outside of the world is one that we never can make; thus, any claim to seeing clearly is a delusion—it simply isn’t possible for us to ever know if there is any

clarity to what we perceive. We are always completely absorbed, layer folded within layer folded within layer. The umbilical chord is never cut, but forever transmits the music of the world; it is in orbit that we perpetually remain and the artist as the philosopher must be a psychologist, but one who is *immersed* in things, one who knows that his vision will always be occluded. Enraptured in the fold, the flower exfoliates from our entrails and we are seduced by the beauty of our visions. “To experience from a *desire* to experience—that,” also, Nietzsche pronounces, “will not succeed. One *cannot* observe oneself while in the midst of an experience, or one’s eye will become an ‘evil eye’.”

To imagine that we gain an objective viewpoint of our own experiences while in the midst of them is to delude our selves—that notorious ‘one’ is always a multitude—and to observe our selves while in the midst of our experiences is to disrupt and alter those very experiences. As Pierre Hadot noted, for Goethe, “only nature—that is, mankind’s senses understood as free from all intermediaries—can see nature. Even observation, which disturbs the phenomenon and immobilizes it, prevents us from seeing living reality.” Thus, not only has ‘one’ corrupted one’s experience, a gross self-deception is committed when believing that it is possible to experience *and* observe what is experienced, that it is seen as if transparent, naked, unveiled. The truth one believes one has gained is simply a perspective disguised. There is no tearing of the veil—each veil reveals but another, a blindness we cannot overcome. In the end, one hasn’t experienced anything, but destroyed one’s experience as if with an ‘evil eye.’ What is necessary is surrender, sacrificing one’s selves in trust, knowing that that which was undergone will remain. To remember and *re-create* existence, first we must forget. That is the secret whispered in our ears by Dionysus; that is what seduced Ariadne.

“A born psychologist,” Nietzsche continues, “instinctively guards against seeing for the sake of seeing; the same applies to *the born painter*. He never works ‘from nature’—he leaves it to his instinct, his *camera obscura*, to sift and express the ‘case,’ ‘nature,’ the object of the ‘experience’ . . . . He is conscious only of the *general*, the conclusion, the outcome: he knows nothing of the arbitrary abstraction from the individual case.” While one is to obey one’s instincts and to guard against false notions of objectivity, one must also guard against individualized distortions, one must sift what one experiences through one’s *own* obscuring camera, that is, one’s instincts, which must guide one, retaining what is general in order to develop a more overarching perspective, such as a historical or geometric one. The individual has been sacrificed. It is in deference to historical or cultural perspectives that the psychologist must subsume its potential individual abstractions, eschewing personal prejudices or distortions, such as, for instance, the Christian’s perception of nature as ‘evil.’ In his *Religio Medici*, even Sir Thomas Browne noted that “the ordinary effects of nature wrought more admiration in [the heathens] than, in the [the children of Israel], all his miracles. Surely the heathens knew better how to

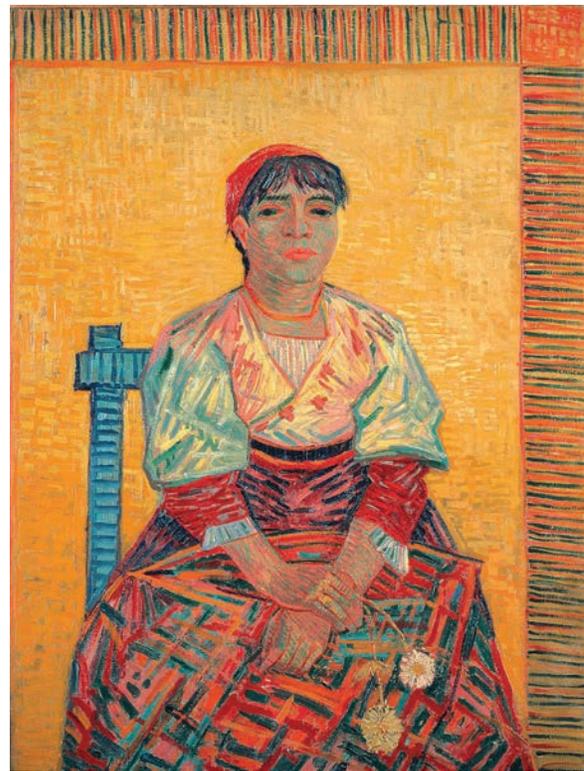
join and read these mystical letters than we Christians, who cast a more careless eye on these common hieroglyphics, and disdain to suck divinity from the flowers of nature.” Amen. One does not work ‘from nature’ alone, simply recording it like a *camera obscura* as if capturing a truth, but one questions like a scientist what one has experienced since the senses cannot be trusted; one expresses, therefore *interprets* nature for the ‘real’ is not knowable. Geometry may hold the world together, but where do we stand after that? The abyss remains. There is no real and there is no essence, there is only the glittering illusion. In truth, it is not that reality doesn’t exist, but that we can never access it, thus, petty facts yield not objective truths; they are, as Oscar Wilde said in “The Decay of Lying,” not only discreditable, they usurp “the domain of fancy” and vulgarize mankind because of their indifference to the poetic. Facts interest not Nietzsche either, but the poetic cinema of existence, for only that cinema is aware of its darkness. “Nature, artistically considered, is no model. It exaggerates, it distorts, it leaves gaps. Nature is *chance*. To study ‘from nature’ seems to me a bad sign: it betrays submission, weakness, fatalism—this lying in the dust before *petits faits* is unworthy of the *complete* artist. Seeing *what is*—that pertains to a different species of spirit, the *anti-artistic*, the factual one. One has to know *who* one is,” which is to say, one has to be a different genus altogether. One has to be a beast *and* a god, that is, one must be a philosopher, that is, one who gives birth to images out of the spirit of Dionysus.

Genitor of surfaces and images, Wilde too found realism dubious; it was to him a complete failure. The dream of true perception is the dream that Dionysus does not dream. As if embodying Nietzsche, Wilde said: “no great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.” “Truth,” he declared, “is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” and “it is style that makes us believe in a thing, nothing but style.” Nature, as man, and man is nature, is not to be trusted. It not only exaggerates and distorts but it leaves things to chance and the psychologist as the artist cannot leave things to chance—that is anti-artistic. It is to succumb to a presumption, which is not to create but to think that one has *seen*, that a veil has been removed and the cinema overcome. Chance does not reveal some greater truth. One will not seize ‘the real’ or a more supposedly truthful perspective of the world simply through observing chance events. The chance event is but a moment of becoming, not an overarching truth that is indicative of some lasting reality. To leave things to chance is to blindly trust what cannot be trusted, to rely on the transitory as the eternal when there is no eternal; it is to believe that the caterpillar remains a caterpillar, while the one who engages in further observations, the one who does not rely upon what is first sensed, knows that the caterpillar is but an instance of a different, larger, more elusive reality. Nature is as submissive, as weak, as fatalistic as man; ‘petty facts’ do not capture reality and chance Nietzsche infers, at least in this regard, is

a passing actuality one must interrogate. Seeing *what is*, truly seeing is not possible, nor is it desirable; insights are not brought forth simply through the naked observance of nature. The psychologist must be like a deep sea diver who penetrates into the nether regions, across, over, and down, and the unconscious, which is our only perhaps valuable or trustworthy guide, must be the psychologist's Vergil. Or we must dance on the surface of the world as if we were vectors along its circumference, or twirl eternally like dervishes in ceaseless motion, spinning into ever quicker and quicker circles of ecstasy, giving harmony even to conflict.

If art's concern is life, if it is to be as philosophical as philosophy, the artist as the philosopher must know itself as well as it can. In making art then, the artist cannot leave things to chance alone; the arbitrary is not representative of becoming. It yields not some greater limpidity but is still caliginous. What is of paramount importance here is the 'psychologist's' relation to the world, the mode of observation that the 'psychologist' engages in. It reveals whether one is a born painter—or whether one has made oneself into one—or if one has Cyclopean vision. To observe and to know that what one observes is but a perspective and not an ultimate reality is imperative. It is a philosophical necessity, and as a painter who is also a psychologist, van Gogh and the painters commonly referred to as 'Expressionist' were concerned with observing and with experiencing the world and depicting *their* experience of the world as vigorously and as faithfully as possible. The real was not to be captured through mere impressions, that is, *it could not be*; it is not discernible through such means, and their artistic vision as well as their techniques and their method of painting articulate this awareness. Realism and Naturalism were not truths but lies in the mouths of those who could not laugh; obscuring clouds which thought they were reflecting mirrors, and philosophy and science were disrupting the validity of such artistic practices and such modes of perception. In order to get closer and closer to becoming, van Gogh and the 'Expressionists' developed new practices of painting which were, in Nietzsche's sense, psychological. While their modes of observation and expression are related, their nuances reveal how distinct they actually are from one another, if not to a large degree even opposed. What is of concern is their relation to nature and their modes of observation and expression. Are they stripping Isis of her veils, are they adorers of her surfaces, or do they invoke completely different gods?

Vincent van Gogh, *The Italian Woman*, 1887  
Oil on canvas  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Gift of the Baroness Eva Gebhard-Gourgaud  
Courtesy Neue Galerie New York



In the Neue Galerie's exhibition *Van Gogh and Expressionism*, the "tremendous influence which van Gogh exerted upon Austrian and German Expressionist artists" was explored as an exhibition for the first time. It was developed in association with the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, where the show originated and ran from 24 November 2006 – 4 March 2007. When Max Pechstein, one of the Die Brücke artists, declared that van Gogh was father to all the 'Expressionists,' the Dutch painter's fate as one of the progenitors of early twentieth century art was reverently declared. What influence signifies demands interrogation, but that will temporarily be deferred. Aside from such testimony, and the letters, diaries, and journals of the 'Expressionist' artists further substantiate the debt, the paintings themselves provide the most compelling and forceful evidence, attesting that van Gogh's impact on 'Expressionism' is incontrovertible. Sons though—all but one of the painters, Gabriel Münter, in the exhibition were men—are not the mere shadows of their fathers; often, even while influenced by them they are simultaneously at war with them, locked in violent contests in order to free themselves to discover their own paths. It is an agonistic event. At very least, van Gogh was a dynamic catalyst whose life and paintings served as explosive models for an age on the verge of creation and destruction.



My great wish is to learn to *change and remake reality*. I want my paintings to be *inaccurate and anomalous in such a way that they become lies*, if you like, *but lies that are more truthful than literal truth*.

(Vincent van Gogh)

In January of 1885, several months before painting *The Potato Eaters*, Vincent van Gogh declared in a letter to his brother Theo that "whether people approve or do not approve of what I do and how I do it, I personally know no other way than *to wrestle with nature* long enough for her to *tell me her secret*." When expressing the manner of his method of creating, van Gogh revealed the character of his relationship to nature, embodying a tradition or heritage that erupted with Heraclitus. In referring to his relationship with nature as a 'confrontation that made him feel more himself,' van Gogh defined his bond with nature not as passive, but as active and *agonal*. Nature, though something he was in awe of, was something he wrestled with, something he said he was in "a hand-to-hand struggle with." It was a competition. Out of that struggle, which was marked by an ascetic type of suffering, his vision of art was formulated and refined, though it was always to undergo transformation.

One year after seriously taking up drawing, van Gogh emphasized the value to his brother Theo of devoting one's life "to expressing the poetry hidden"

not only in “the figure of the laborer,” but in plowed fields, in sand, sea, and sky, elaborating an aesthetic practice of *aletheia*. Nature reveals something, speaks to the painter who investigates the world like a psychologist: “something of what wind or breath or figure *has told me is in*” the painting. The earth is van Gogh’s academy; nature is his studio; the sun is his master. He listens to them as they speak.



Greetings, Great Star! What would your happiness be, were it not for those whom you illumine?  
(Nietzsche—*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

What he creates is not born of a “studied manner or a system” but is “rather *from nature itself*.” But this is not naturalism or realism at work; van Gogh is not merely holding up a mirror to nature—that is a practice he disdained, something he criticized with derision as “still connected with romanticism.” He painted what struck him, not simply photographic resemblances of what he saw. What guided him was “passionate expression,” which was “a means of expressing and intensifying” things. What was crucial for him was painting the poetry concealed within nature. How he discovered what he referred to as the ‘secrets of nature’ must be taken into consideration.

In *The Veils of Isis*, an elucidation of man’s relation to nature and the changing conception of Heraclitus’ statement on nature, often translated as ‘nature loves to hide,’ Pierre Hadot distinguishes two methods of unveiling ‘the secrets of nature’ and they include the Promethean and the Orphic: “Whereas the Promethean attitude is inspired by audacity, boundless curiosity, the will to power, and the search for utility, the Orphic attitude, by contrast, is inspired by respect in the face of mystery and disinterestedness.” Further, the Orphic method is one that “seeks to discover the secrets of nature while confining itself to perception, without the help of instruments, and using the resources of philosophy and poetic discourse or those of the pictorial arts.” “Orpheus,” Hadot elaborates, “thus penetrates the secrets of nature not through violence but through melody, rhythm, and harmony.” In van Gogh’s immediate observation of and confrontation with nature, as well as in his immersion in literature, both of which he related directly to life and to his work as a painter, sensory perception guided his discoveries. Thus, his mode of ‘unveiling nature’s secrets’ was Orphic, which further letters as well as his practice as an artist confirm.

Yielding to the secrets of nature, the Orphic painter’s art is like that of the lyric poet who, while rooting creativity in the self, does not root it in an empirical form of the self. Rather, it is rooted in the primal Dionysian self, which is



Vincent van Gogh, *Field with Flowers near Arles, 1888*  
Oil on canvas  
Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, (Vincent Van Gogh Foundation)  
Courtesy Neue Galerie New York

the obliterated self transfigured in the body of the deity. In the world of appearance as Nietzsche defines it, the logic of identity is shattered, each mask revealing but a proliferation of further masks. Yet, while nature is van Gogh's goddess, his relation to her, or *it*, is complex and nuanced. He is no simple naturalist, more the epopt of a pagan cult. Though he continuously reiterated that one must work directly from nature, he didn't merely reproduce exactly

what he saw or brought forth; instead, he used color "arbitrarily in order to express [himself] forcibly." At first, from his statements, it almost seems as if he was interested in the most extreme mimetic depiction of nature. Again and again, without reservation, he decries studio painting and with unrestrained fervor insists that painters must go outside, paint outdoors, paint under the sun, paint *in the midst of* nature, expressing in this fidelity one more binding than any other in his life. It is reality that is of paramount import to van Gogh for, according to him, one's imagination "always falls short of [nature]." He reiterates this point tirelessly. At times, the results of his immersion in nature are reinforced in the most literal manner: "I had to wipe off at least a hundred or more flies from the four paintings you will receive, not counting the dust and sand, not counting that when one carries them across the heath and through the hedges for several hours, some thorns will scratch them, etc." Material reality blends with his depiction of it as if to make it more real. Studio painters, those who work from memory, and the painters of Arabesque visions are all generally condemned. Young painters who compose from memory disgust him—"the whole thing makes me sick"—and the painters of fantastic scenes are derogatorily referred to as "*imagiers!*" From this it might be possible to conclude that van Gogh is working in the very manner that Nietzsche problematized; yet, there is a keener degree of perspicacity in his method. It is not the dream of true perception.

Instinct is a primary force for van Gogh, who continually sifted things through his *camera obscura*. Facts were anathema to him; they did not reveal truths. "I see a chance of giving a true impression of what I see. Not always literally exact, or rather never exact, for one sees nature through one's own temperament." What he was interested in was *intensification* and he was aware that what he was creating was a vision. He was *changing* and *remaking* reality, or what he could know of reality. And his overarching vision was of painting itself; of the past and *the future of painting*. To Theo, he confessed that he was nothing, that he was not interested in success, and that it was the future of painting that he believed his work would aid. The painter of the future would he said be a 'colorist such as has never yet existed' and it was precisely through his arbitrary use of color that van Gogh forged a new dimension, instigating an even more extreme and arbitrary use of color that painters such as Kandinsky, Heckel, Kirchner and others would employ. "As for me, with my presentiment of a new world, I firmly believe in the possibility of an immense renaissance of art." While his viewpoints would have most likely continued to change over time, van Gogh may have enormously disliked 'symbolist' and 'expressionist' painting. For him, the painter must depict what is *directly experienced* from reality, what is brought forth or revealed through Orphic perception yet, feeling is involved—what one feels is to enter the painting, but not to the degree that what is painted is so distorted that it is unrecognizable. Feeling in and of itself is not to dominate, let alone some psychological experience of reality. "It is the painter's duty," he declared, "to be extremely absorbed by nature and to use all his intelligence to express sentiment in his work *so that it becomes intelligible*." For van Gogh, this is "not painting things as they are, but as they are felt"—it is to make things "truer than the literal truth" and that is not by any means a slavish or mechanical imitation of nature. Nature is to be *poetized*, but always with an eye towards reality. A literary reflection perhaps bears some insight into his vision of art, or his relationship to the 'real' and the extent of how critical he was of excessive psychological interpretations of 'reality.'

While professing that, at times, he admired the work of Hoffman and Poe, he found it more than not "impossible, because the imagination behind it is ponderous and meaningless, and has *no contact with reality*." The excruciatingly sensitive painter who was faithful to the real—or his still basically mimetic image of the world—finally proclaimed that he found their work "very repulsive." It was for him too gross a distortion. There is a tightrope then that as a painter he balances on—while decrying studio painting and any kind of photographic-like mimesis of reality, he wants to remain true to nature, but to imbue it with his thoughts and feelings, and it is this inclusion of man's experience of nature or the mixture of man's experience with nature's 'secret' that defines art for van Gogh. "I can still," he said, "find no better definition of the word art than this: art is man added to nature—nature, reality, truth, but

with a significance, a conception, a character, which the artist brings out in it, and to which he gives expression, “*qu’il degage*,” which he disentangles, sets free and interprets.” Paintings that accomplish this disentanglement and unraveling of nature’s secrets through the Orphic mode “say more” and say what they are saying “more clearly than nature herself.” While the painter’s imagination may fall short of nature, art for van Gogh “sometimes rises above nature.” This occurs when the artist subsumes himself to nature and becomes a “*type* instilled from many *individuals*.” Here the shattering of the logic of identity and the continuous metamorphosis of being becomes even clearer. Van Gogh is all the painters in history. After perishing, he entered the pantheon of individuals out of which new masks would be created, and the ‘Expressionists’ reconfigured those masks, giving birth to new masks, to masks of their own which made manifest their encounter with the world. For van Gogh, nature had no significance or character; it is *the artist* that imbues the ‘goddess’ with significance and character through art. Or, the significance and character of nature cannot be expressed by nature alone, but is augmented by the artist, who gives expression to what nature cannot. The artist liberates significance and character from nature and interprets it through the fullness of expression more than nature ever can. The artist articulates the silent, manifesting images, giving birth to gods. Van Gogh makes of existence a song; the light of the sun flickers through his projector.



What beauteous pictures now  
Rose in harmonious imagery—they rose  
As from some distant region of my soul  
And came along like dreams. . .  
(Wordsworth—*The Prelude*)

It is the song of the self but that is the song of the lyric poet whose self has been obliterated and who when he speaks of the self, is speaking of an altogether different self—it is the self that reflects and expresses nature, both revealing and creating its experience and its vision of the world.

Is this the lifting of a veil, or is it a knowing dance with the veils, van Gogh dreaming the dream of appearance?



The dialogue with nature remains the condition sine qua non for the artist. The artist is a human being; he is himself nature, and a piece of nature within the area of nature . . . a creature on earth and a creature in the universe: a creature on one star among other stars.  
(Klee—*On Modern Art*)

The influence of van Gogh on the painters exhibited in *Van Gogh and Expressionism*, that their work revealed a deliberate interaction or engagement with his, was palpably clear, but how he influenced them, what they made of his work, and what their relation to him is needs to be further elucidated, as well as how their relation to nature differed from his. The primary difficulty of the exhibition, if not the precarious escarpment on which it pivoted resided in the classification of all of the painters aside from van Gogh—Kandinsky, Kokoschka, Heckel, Schiele, Gerstl, Klimt, Jawlensky, Boeckl, Pechstein, Schmidt-Rottluff, Nolde, Macke, Marc, Münter, Klee, Corinth, Meidner, and Dix—as ‘Expressionist.’ To unify these varied individuals under the rubric ‘Expressionist’—which, of course, is an act already committed by art historians—though some of them were in groups together, is to efface their singularities and to blur what is in each distinctive. It is a false construction, invented to give cohesion to a fragmented and disparate history that essentially resists such unity, or, *uniformity*. Even painters within the Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter movements, each of which only existed for several years and neither of which referred to themselves as ‘Expressionist,’ had markedly different styles.

Clearly, such terms are in the chemical sense volatile and it is only through want of some greater strength of perception that they are even sustained. It is out of the blindness of the herd, out of a sheer refusal to perceive as well as an obsession for neat historical categorizations, that, predominantly, they persist. The term itself has shadowy origins, too. As the late Donald E. Gordon, whose *Expressionism: Art and Idea* is one of the seminal studies of the so-called movement, noted, it originated not in Germany as is commonly believed but in France. The term is French and was originally associated with Moreau and after him Matisse. It was not coined in 1911 by Herwarth Walden as Stolwijk claims after the curator Jill Lloyd in his essay in the exhibition catalogue, but, as Gordon revealed, was actually invented by Antonin Matejcek in 1910. He employed the term in his essay *XXXI. Vystava: Les Indépendants*, the catalogue introduction to an exhibition of paintings from the Paris Salon des Indépendants held in Prague from February – March of 1910. In Matejcek’s essay, Cezanne was declared the “spiritual father” of the movement with Gauguin and van Gogh listed as its pioneers. Other painters deemed by Matejcek ‘Expressionist’ included the Nabi Bonnard, Fauves such as Marquet, Camoin, Puy and Matisse, and the Symbolists Redon and Girieud. The first exhibition in the world accredited as ‘Expressionist’ occurred in 1911 in Berlin and though it was referred to as French, comprised French, Spanish, and Dutch artists such as Derain, Braque, von Dongen, Vlaminck, and Picasso. When one critic of the time suggested that Pechstein should have been included in the exhibition, the director of the Dresden Städtische Kunstsammlungen, Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, found the suggestion dubious,

stated that the painters in question had no relation to one another and that the phrase 'Expressionist' signified little and was the result merely of an impasse. Only later was 'Expressionist' conceptualized and imposed by critics on German and Viennese paintings and painters, though not without resistance. During its existence, Die Brücke as a movement was never referred to as 'Expressionist,' nor were any of its members singled out as 'Expressionist' painters. And in 1912, Marc and Kandinsky rejected the title not only as an accurate description of their work but of the work of other German movements as well. Instead, if one had to define the movement as having a single style Marc thought the phrase 'Die Wilden,' which is far more fluid, more thoughtful a description of Die Brücke style. Clearly, 'Expressionist' was not a term adopted by the artists themselves, as Breton and other Surrealists adopted the term Surrealist, and it should perhaps be employed with much reservation.

One other claim which must be examined is that of the curator, Jill Lloyd, as well as numerous writers in the catalogue who second her claim, which is that *Van Gogh and Expressionism* reveals "in depth for the first time van Gogh's formative impact on leading German and Austrian 'Expressionists'." In a reply to the author of this essay, Ms. Lloyd clarified that it was the first exhibition "to develop the visual potential of the subject and to pull all the strands together." The claim is still strange and more than difficult to believe if not substantiate while riding on the qualifying "in depth" is rather tenuous. More difficult to countenance is the claim of Renee Price, the Director of the Neue Galerie, who stated that van Gogh's impact "has never been the subject of extended scholarly inquiry." Stefan Koldehoff, who wrote one of the essays in the catalogue, is seemingly at odds with these claims when noting that "the thesis that van Gogh was a role model for the 'Expressionists' is over a century old."

Van Gogh's formative impact on the 'Expressionists' is a veritable commonplace of art history and has been since early in the twentieth century. In 1907, van Gogh was even referred to as 'Germanic' and numerous attempts were made by German critics to appropriate him, as did Georg Fuchs, who compared van Gogh to Hölderlin in his 1907 *Deutsche Form*. There is Matejcek's aforementioned groundbreaking work in 1910, as well as others in the 10's. Later, in the early 20's, Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, who as noted previously questioned the validity of the word 'Expressionist,' stated in his *Die Kunst der Gegenwart* that van Gogh was "the greatest pioneer of Nordic-Germanic Expressionism." There is even a dissertation, written in the 50's by Wolfgang Eckhardt, *Van Gogh und Deutschland, ein Beitrag zum Thema: Künstler und Publikum*, which explores the very subject in question. In a review in 1954 of Werner Weisbach's *Vincent Van Gogh: Kunst und Schicksal, Vol. 2, Künstlerischer Aufstieg und Ende*, K. F. Ertel observed that one could "speak of a broadly-based and well-explored field within the framework of Van Gogh research and . . . Art Nouveau and early Expressionism," highlighting Fritz Schmalenbach's *The Basis of Early Expressionism*. And

in a review to two exhibitions (Fauves and German Expressionism) in 1966 in Paris, Aaron Sheon remarked that “Schmidt-Rottluff’s thickly painted *Self-Portrait* and Kirchner’s *Tête d’Enfant*, both from 1906, illustrate how Van Gogh’s and Matisse’s art had been diffused throughout Europe.” There is also Patrick Bridgewater’s (another essayist of the catalogue) *The Expressionist Generation and van Gogh*, which was published in 1987 (this is mentioned in the catalogue), and Donald E. Gordon’s *Expressionism: Art and Idea*, which omission of mention is especially peculiar considering it is one of the most widely available and important texts on the subject. In Germany and the Netherlands, there must be texts too which have examined this relation. More recently, and more damning, in 1991, the Folkwang Museum staged an extensive exhibition titled *Van Gogh and Modern Art (1890-1914)*, which featured works by van Gogh exhibited during the period in conjunction with over one hundred works by French and German artists who van Gogh influenced. The exhibition featured many of the same artists as the Neue Galerie exhibition, including Kirchner, Kandinsky, and Schiele, as well as many of the artists originally referred to as ‘Expressionist,’ such as Von Dongen, Derain, and Matisse. Of all the evidence, this shatters their claim more than any other. Why then make such claims? Regardless of whether this is or is not the first exploration of van Gogh’s influence and impact is inconsequential; the exhibition remains an important investigation and examination and it does I concur contain many discoveries.

To see, to perceive, to experience is wrought with difficulty and such terms as ‘Expressionist’ essentially only obfuscate, they do not clarify; employing them to articulate what one has seen is like wearing glasses when one’s sight is perfect. In the end, such terms do not illuminate but impede one’s vision and the articulation and communication of what one has seen. When the degree to which we can see is already limited, such obfuscations further diminish abilities that we cannot permit to ebb. If we are to encounter things directly, if we are to see and experience them so that our encounter with things is manifold and original, it is vital to trust our responses and to move beyond our reliance on concepts and move into the dark of not knowing, into the possibility of inexpressivity, into silence. In that is our originality and in that is our passageway to sight. Originality as Emerson said is “being, being



Ludwig Meidner, *I and the City*, 1913  
Oil on canvas  
Private Collection, Courtesy Neue Galerie New York

one's self, and reporting accurately what we see and are. Genius is the first instance, sensibility, the capacity of receiving just impressions from the external world, and the power of co-ordinating these after the laws of thought. It implies Will, or original force, for their right distribution and expression." The status of seeing aside, accuracy aside, in being completely himself, van Gogh organized, that is, shaped into a style, and presented *his* vision of the world, making his originality evident in a forceful and dramatic manner. When encountering his paintings for the first time, the painters here being examined were confronted with a mask more powerful than any mask they had ever seen. It was not the mask of one who was a dwarf of himself, it was not the mask of a god in ruins, but it was one who insisted on the absolute validity of his selves and let them flourish incandescently. It was van Gogh with the mask of the future.

In that radiant mask the future of painting truly did reside, at least one of its futures, and to each painter now considered 'Expressionist' different pathways were visible, pathways which encouraged them to manifest their originality and shape masks of their own. While initially some of them may have imitated van Gogh, ultimately, they incorporated and transformed him, finding in him a base metal out of which to forge new materials. For Kandinsky, aside from his vibrant combinations of color, van Gogh's paintings contained the seeds of abstraction, germs which he would extend to extremes far from the orbit of van Gogh's earth. Instigated by such force, Kandinsky would be able to affirm in 1911 in the Blaue Reiter manifesto that "the signs of the new inner renaissance," the very renaissance which van Gogh thought possible and effectively proclaimed, were evident. At one point van Gogh even experimented with abstractions but said in the end that though it was "enchanted ground," with it, "one soon finds oneself up against a stone wall. I won't," he continued explaining to his brother Theo, say "that one might not venture on it after a virile lifetime of research, of a hand-to-hand struggle with nature, but I personally don't want to bother my head with such things." He veered toward the abyss, but retreated from it, probably as we can infer because of his ultimate fidelity to nature, to his inability or refusal to consider more unsettling perspectives. Later, the 'Abstract Expressionists' would shatter form in an even more pronounced if not violent manner and extend painting into domains van Gogh foresaw but did not venture into and probably would have detested more than Francis Bacon. To Kokoschka, it was van Gogh's link with the figurative tradition and his fervent humanism which aided later artists in avoiding what he saw as the 'dangers' of abstract art. For Heckel, the dramatic intensity of van Gogh's visuality was completely unique, encouraging the artist's own vivid and striking depictions of reality. Schiele's inclusion in the exhibition is perhaps more intriguing than that of any other painter—perhaps even more than Klimt's—for, at least visually, in terms of the application of paint, van Gogh's influence on the Austrian painter is not as discernible. There

may actually not be one, but without the excoriating clarity of the wandering Dutchman's self-portraits, the impetus for Schiele's extreme, hyper-conscious and histrionic self-portraits may not have come so freely. It was the energy, the galvanic force, and van Gogh's self-reflexivity, his knowledge that what he was creating was a vision as well as his life which affected a diverse array of painters, each with distinct and powerful visions of their own, attesting to the richness of van Gogh's work and what it was, and *still is* capable of provoking.

In general, most of these artists directed their attention not toward nature but toward their own inner worlds, making van Gogh's extensive influence ridden with tension. However, while they did pivot away from nature, in another sense, it remained their sole concern. True, the natural world that van Gogh immersed himself in was not of abiding interest to most of the painters here, yet they focused on 'nature' just as intensely; that is, not on the natural world but on *themselves* as representatives of nature. As noted by Klee in the epigraph to this section, the artist is "himself nature, and a piece of nature within the area of nature." "It is not form," he said, "but a kind of inner truthfulness that determines whether or not a painting will have achieved something of significance." Franz Marc declared that the painter "has only to listen to [his] own conscience—he who honestly asks will be told when the feelings that he expressed in his paintings were genuine and when he contented himself, frivolously, with empty formalistic shapes." What marks the highest if not sole level of achievement here is not adherence to natural form or one's ability to adequately or strikingly depict such forms. The painter is now free from all the previous constraints or demands of painting but given, and all gifts are comprised of dangers as the German sense of the word connotes, perhaps the most strenuous constraint or demand of all—that of striving for *inner truthfulness, of listening*, and listening is a difficult art, *to the music of one's own inner depths*. In this is a decisive shift. Van Gogh focused on the natural world and attempted to discover its secrets, though cognizant that what he saw was affected by his temperament. It was not some truth, but a perspective of the world. However, while he did lead the way out of the rigid 'optical' naturalism and 'scientific' coloring of the 'Impressionists,' his paintings remain almost logical in comparison to those of the 'Expressionists.' In his work there is a structure and order that overrides any distortion. In van Gogh's paintings, a tree is always a tree. A table is a table. A field is a field. The colors of such things may lack verity, but the forms remain realistic whereas the 'Expressionists' shatter natural structure almost altogether. In fact, one of the stated goals of the Blaue Reiter manifesto was the very "displacement of the center of gravity in art, literature, music." If the center of gravity is displaced, then perspective is displaced and the whole world becomes a topsy-turvy abyss. Where perspective in van Gogh is disrupted or flattened out, in most 'Expressionist' work it is completely obliterated. In many 'Expressionist' paintings, it often isn't clear what one is seeing and in

Alexej von Jawlensky, *Self-Portrait in Top Hat*, 1904  
Oil on canvas  
Private Collection, Courtesy Neue Galerie New York



that is a deliberate practice. A tree may be an amorphous blur; a table a block of color; a field of grass a sea of fire or a tumultuous ocean. There is no ground; there is no above or below; there is no sustaining law but only the eternal flux, the chaos that is chance, the dance of fire flickering like frames of a Stan Brakhage film. The focus is entirely on the self, which is examined as nature, and an expression of that self's experience of the world. It is not a truth claim wherein some transparency has been achieved. It is an intensification and complete internalization of a focus that was formerly directed, at least predominantly, outward. The nether regions the 'Expressionists' explored as psychologists were the nether regions of their psyches. The poetry they painted was not that which was concealed within the natural world, but what they brought forth from within themselves. It is not that van Gogh was the apotheosis of the subject-self, for while imbuing all of his work with

what he felt, in the end he always deferred to nature, but that all of the painters considered 'Expressionist' apotheosized the self as hitherto it never had been in the history of painting. In an epoch when the status of the subject could not have been more tenuous, as if it might slip away forever like an eel gliding through our hands, it became a major point of orientation. That fragile stability of the self remained; it is apparent in even the most aggrandized self-portraits, revealing that the very selves that created them could dissipate and vanish, if they ever existed at all.

In Alexej von Jawlensky's eerie *Self-Portrait in Top Hat*, 1904, the distinction between the natural world and the painter is nearly erased. In fact, it doesn't exist. He is blended into nature, or nature is fused into him as he is fused into it, a swirl of forces ready to consume one another. His left eye is visible, but is on the verge of vanishing as is his body, which is being consumed by the greenery about him. His top hat is the sole vestige of civilization—his clothes are already in the midst of transmogrification—and the firmest object in the painting; otherwise, the painter could be a flower within the larger field of nature, or something that nature will eventually consume entirely. And the top hat is beginning to dissipate, its edges dissolving in the storm of green about him. The instability of materiality is hauntingly palpable.

Herbert Boeckl's *Portrait of Kurt Plahna*, 1917, is similar in its near obliteration of the subject, whose intensity remains but which is also blended into its

surroundings, a whorl of violent, contrasting colors reflecting an emotional intensity and inner turmoil in which van Gogh's influence is obvious. Conversely, the macabre darkness of the painting, its real ferocity if not terror, is lost in the exhibition catalogue and looks like a wholly other, much lighter, less apocalyptic work—Plahna died at sixteen in the defense of Carinthia weeks after the portrait was made. The reproduction of the painting is not even remotely accurate. This is a serious flaw with all of the reproductions, which distort the colors of the paintings and make them bright when they aren't, while many lack the luminosity they have in life, such as van Gogh's *Self-Portrait*, 1889, which is as radiant as few paintings in the world. Its glow is mesmerizing, like the light of the moon piercing an emerald in the blackest night.

Schmidt-Rottluff's *Self-Portrait*, 1906, is another instance of an ironic emblazoning but near erasure of the subject, which is threatened by and fractions from amalgamation by its surroundings. The defining features of the painter's visage are clear enough—Schmidt-Rottluff accentuates himself through an intensification of color and thick, short dabs of paint—but he is amorphous, more a fiery mixture of shape-shifting colors that merge into the background of the painting than in any of van Gogh's self-portraits.

In Emil Nolde's *Portrait of Schmidt-Rottluff*, 1906, the distinction between the subject and the background is in part nebulous, too. His gaze, which is directed towards the left field of the painting as if something is approaching to obliterate him, is full of apprehension. Many of his features are clearly defined—he is as much a part of the background of the painting as it is of him. Where the self, or selves inhere and the natural world ends or begins is strictly *not* clear.

This aspect of the above paintings could be seen as a figuration of the self as nature, of a depiction of the tenuous membrane separating man from the world which, in van Gogh, is always on the verge of exploding. In his reality, the world is aflame, like glass in a crucible, the whorl and torrent of becoming pushed to an extremity but not yet breaking open. In the world of the 'Expressionists,' the glass never makes it to the annealer. It explodes from the thermal stress. It is broken open. Chaos is presented in its unabashed formlessness and the world as appearance flourishes in all of its terror, flickering violently before us, an apocalypse ready to consume not merely



Emil Nolde, *Portrait of Schmidt-Rottluff*, 1906  
Oil on canvas  
Stiftung Seebüll Ada und Emil Nolde  
Courtesy Neue Galerie New York



Ludwig Meidner, *Apocalyptic Landscape*, 1913  
Oil on canvas, 26 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches  
Fishman Family Collection

every individual, but the world itself. Here we are, exploding together, in Meidner's *Apocalyptic Landscape*, 1913.

This is not the dream of true perception, nor the obscuring mirror which does not know that it obscures. This is world as appearance in its fullest, most scintillating sense. This is world as appearance in its horrific truth.

In refusing to try to depict the world in a

realistic manner, which they knew wasn't possible, the 'Expressionist' painters overcame the threat of the *camera obscura*. The world as glittering illusion was given its full glory. They did not see things as they thought they were but created a vision of the world; they interpreted it and pushed what was impulse in van Gogh to its absolute extremity. In their phantasmagoric use of color, the 'Expressionists' became the arbitrary colorists of the future that van Gogh called forth. For him, the painter had to depict what he directly experienced from reality; what the 'Expressionists' depicted was the direct experience of their own inner selves. That was something van Gogh may have found ponderous and meaningless as, clearly, these painters had less contact with 'reality' than did Hoffmann and Poe, but then, perhaps their contact with reality was even sharper, perhaps they approached reality as van Gogh never had, perhaps they moved into the dark abyss of becoming, in which terror often threatens obliteration. "Art," as Oscar Wilde said, "finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror." In knowing that the mirror is but an obscuring device, in knowing that the veils of the saving sorceress could not be removed, the 'Expressionist' painters confronted the tragic reality of the world. As they dreamt, they were inventive without return; in that plenitude, out of such abundance, through such sacrificial expenditure, they were nature in action, giving birth to joy and to terror, knowing full well that their encounter with the world was but one encounter, one film strip flickering through a projector, as reliant upon light as upon darkness, not a

revelation, but yet another appearance flickering forth. The recreation of new values was for them not possible without the simultaneous destruction of the ossified values at rule in their time, not only in painting, but in life itself. In their confrontation with the world as tragic, they refused the myopic lie of Socratic optimism and they refused the belief in a stable and comforting truth, rushing instead like bulls into the terrifying ambiguity of the abyss. It is the world that laughs as we perish; it is the world that dances as we evaporate. It is the world as will to power and nothing besides. . .

**Title page images:**  
**Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield Behind St. Paul's Hospital with a Reaper*, 1889 (detail)**  
**Oil on canvas**  
**Museum Folkwang Essen, Courtesy Neue Galerie New York**  
**and**  
**Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889 (detail)**  
**Oil on canvas**  
**National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney**  
**Courtesy Neue Galerie New York**

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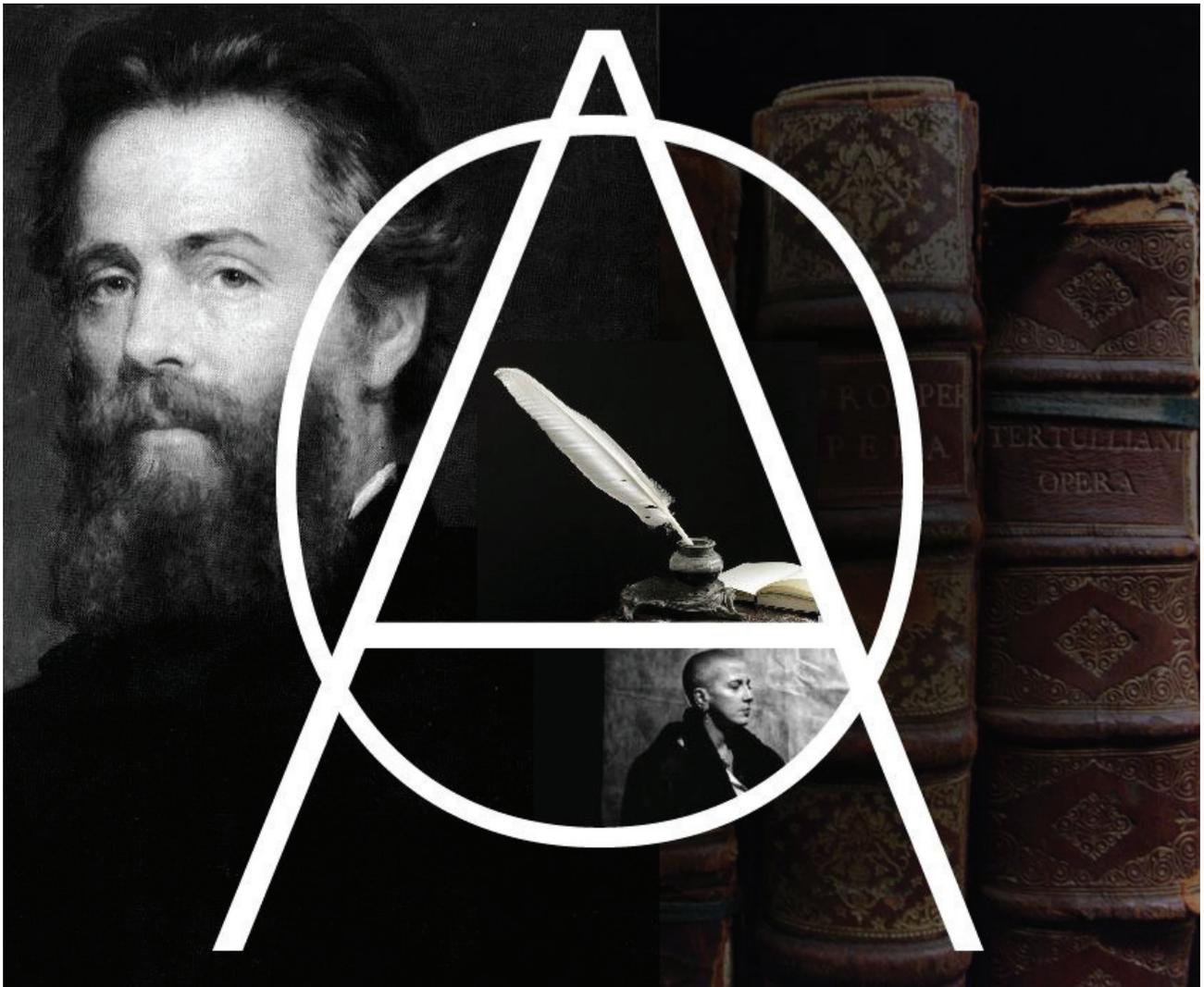
# The Body 'Prefers Not To':

Nietzsche on Ethereal Run in Melville and Acker

by Camelia Elias, Roskilde University

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**HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



# The Body 'Prefers Not To'

**Nietzsche on Ethereal Run in Melville and Acker**

**by Camelia Elias  
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One of the main ideas in cultural studies, which takes into account the transformative processes in society and which has the potential to reconfigure humans, relies on the notion that individuals acquire agency only when they are narrated. It is thus through extension, through the agency of an other's body and language, and through networking that a sense of identity emerges. In other words, we are what we are because we are supplemented. This law of the supplement in poststructuralist discourse opposes traditional thinking, which holds the notion that transformations come from within. The body as a container for thought poses several contradictions. First, insofar as thinking depends on the ability to make distinctions through language, the assumption that thought arises uncontaminated and in pure form rests on fallacious ground. What characterizes language and its arbitrary relations is not a unitary form framed by the singularity of one thought, but a fragmentary relation of dependency between language and the body. It is through our bodies that we articulate whatever conventions we follow, and hence a second contradiction arises. If thinking materializes as it sometimes does (one hopes), it is not because it finds itself in an immanent relation to the body, but because it transcends the body on its own terms—the body's, that is. The materialization of thought occurs only insofar as the body desecrates it through arbitrary articulation. Hence, one can concur that the relation between thought and the body as mediated through language is bound to situate itself in the inscrutable, and the incalculable. This irreverential relation may be said to rely on opportunity rather than calculation, which means that the language of the body, if it chooses to articulate, is unpredictable. In this relation, if thought is capable of and hence retains any kind of singular manifestation, it will be a thought of the body's ability to express a desire for immortality. According to cyber critics, this desire alone marks our entrance and ultimate belonging to the realm of the cyborg.

## **A(h)nnunciation**

One of the philosophers who have anticipated the modern discourse on immortality in a most interesting way is Friedrich Nietzsche. In Nietzsche's desire to act as a "physician of culture," he makes a most remarkable statement, which I suggest links the idea of immortality with immortality's recurrent return as grammar. In his *Twilight of the Idols* he thus states: "I am afraid we are not rid of God, because we still have faith in grammar" (Nietzsche, 1984c: 483), indicating the paradox of God's ethereal yet continual domination over the body through the materialization of language. Nietzsche

writes by fragments when he posits the hermeneutic idea that affirming one singular part of one's life means affirming it as a whole, in its entirety. How the part becomes a whole, and how the part bestows singularity over the whole is seen particularly in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1888/1979). In the paratextual subtitle of this autobiography, "How one becomes what one is," we find Nietzsche's attempt at translating description into an imperative that has the affirmation of a singular experience at stake: "become what you are." As critics have already noted, there is a stringent correlation between the idea of immortality and the ability of an individual to create a 'singular' space in society that can be called his or her own and that can be ensured to be his or her own even after the person's death. Daniel Ahern, in his *Nietzsche as Cultural Physician* (1995), juxtaposes Nietzsche's concern with exhaustion, decadence, sickness and health—all constitutive of a "physiological dynamics"—with immortality and eternal recurrence—constitutive of what I would call "ethereal dynamics." I suggest that what informs both these dynamics is an attempt at formulating a singularity of presence through affirmation. As Bert Olivier also observes in his "Nietzsche, immortality, singularity and eternal recurrence":



What makes a true or 'singular' individual, for Nietzsche, is precisely the ability to overcome the tendency towards a kind of disintegration of the self into incompatible components, reneging on the (admittedly formidable) effort to refuse and conquer this tendency. Such a refusal manifests itself in harnessing all the divergent traits and characteristics that comprise a personality, artfully coordinating their differences towards the goal of being an integrated, self-creating, self-created person. (Olivier, 2007: 77)

What interests me here is the link between singularity, immortality and the belief in grammar. In Nietzsche's work this link is formulated either as a demand, an imperative, or an apostrophe. When he exclaims in *The Gay Science*, beginning with an affirmation of a necessity: "One thing is needful. 'Giving style' to one's character—a great and rare art!" (290; 1984b: 98-99), he indicates, by making a proto poststructuralist gesture, that we are already 'other' the moment singularity institutes itself in parenthesis, paratext, and ellipsis, or one could also say, at the margins of grammar. Olivier provides a good definition of singularity (as opposed to the fleeting nature of particularity) by way of quoting Joan Copjec: "This notion of singularity, which is tied to the act of a subject, is defined as modern because it depends on the denigration of any notion of a prior or superior instance that might prescribe or guarantee

the act. *Soul, eternity, absolute or patriarchal power*, all these notions have to be destroyed before an act can be viewed as unique and as capable of stamping itself with its own necessity. One calls *singular* that which, ‘once it has come into being, bears the strange hallmark of something that must be,’ and therefore cannot die...” (Copjec, 2002: 23-24 in Olivier, 2007: 79).

One way in which one’s character acquires style is at the moment when “faith in grammar” gets to be articulated while there is also an attempt at escaping the constricting rules of grammar. If style in its more archaic form means a reduction of things to the bare essential, to gesture, grammar in its most reductive form is manifested through interjections; a mouth gesture (speech) rather than a hand gesture (writing) is bound to have different value stylistically. Interjections have no real grammatical value, and are known as “hesitation devices.” It may be that Nietzsche, being well acquainted with rigorous philological approaches to language, was aware of the value of hesitation when he peppered his works, especially the aphoristic kind, with such interjections as ‘Ah!’ and ‘Oh!’ These interjections usually have no connection to the grammatical sentence which transmits a thought. Such examples of interjective and interruptive yet supplemental kind, one might add, are nowhere clearer articulated than in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. I will engage no further with this work, but let it ghost other examples of writing in which the faith in grammar, once it has come into being, cannot therefore die. Insofar as it can be postulated that Nietzsche was engaged in ghostwriting for Zarathustra, he was interested in the mechanisms of expressing himself in the margins of Zarathustra’s eloquence through interjective interposition. In other words, he explored the possibility of expressing himself through contingency on the must be (Ah!) as a preference for *not dying* (Oh!).

In his book *TechnoLogics: ghosts, the incalculable and the suspension of animation*, Gray Kochhar-Lindgren advances the argument that the ancient dream of immortality is now realized through cloning, genetic research, and artificial intelligence. As he puts it:



Ghosts. Machines. Cyborgs. All are figures that have crossed over, and that assist us in thinking the crossing of the old lines between the living and the dead. All are outlaws, renegades from the proper, going back and forth by day and night, sometimes in disguise, even though the border patrols are everywhere (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2005: 30).

What I find interesting in the growing body of literature and film engaging with both ghosts and cyborgs is the idea that immortality, while implicitly

expressing a right to never die, also takes refuge from itself in the guise of an ethereal body. Immortality is on the run, a refugee, as it were, materialized in the language of the body that would “prefer not to” die. As a departure from Nietzsche, but not in spirit, I want to look here at such different texts as Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and Kathy Acker’s “The language of the body” and make the claim that the body, in its attempt to achieve immortality by ghosting either being, writing, or machine, violates its own right to remain in a state of becoming, or crossing over. Melville’s protagonist, a law-copyist, by repeatedly informing his employer that he prefers not to do any of the tasks imposed on him, institutes a crisis that has consequences for his body: he ends up starving to death in a prison, a situation induced by the state of never either refusing or accepting to eat. Acker’s text posits a similar situation in which the language of the body is translated into rendering an absence. By having an abortion, the protagonist neither refuses nor accepts the potential of the extra body (the baby) to cross over into life. Here I want to suggest that the suspension of animation is contingent on the ethereal body as manifested in the figure of a ghost or a cyborg.

### **O(h)ntology**

One of the trajectories that the logic of the technological takes is to consider the separation of the living from the dead. This separation is often seen in cyber criticism as a relation based on annihilation: as bodies narrate their existence through language, they at the same time undermine that very existence through perpetual violations of language. Where bodies are concerned, language functions as a mechanical supplement subject to change, transformation, and improvement. In computer science, language is already seen as a machine which can be coded and programmed according to an object-oriented ontology, which is to say that desire is brought into the machine as a means to operate with the differential and binary character of language. As Aden Evans puts it: “The result is a fold in the code, which extends outside of its plane toward another dimension, to rub against the human world” (Evans, 2006: 90). This rubbing against each other of man and machine engages creativity that does not rely on a transcendental subject. This latter idea is traced back to Walter Benjamin by critics such as Warwick Mules, for whom Benjamin’s search for a fold in language that would embody experience as unmediated by form is an expression of materiality and plasticity. Benjamin’s thoughts, claims Mules, are furthermore “a reflection on the singularity of experience itself, bereft of the certainty of formal knowledge, dangerous and ruined [...] Creativity is the release of singularity captured in form. To write this sentence as I have just done (but who is this “I”; at what time does this “I” write?) is to make a case for creativity” (Mules, 2006: 75).

Some of the implications of considering subjectivity which is caught between

experience and the body are seen by Kochhar-Lindgren through an ethical prism which filters an essential question: in the face of technology, to what extent can we talk about human nature? The logic of the technological is to compress existing definitions of human nature, which situate human nature in context à la Jose Ortega y Gasset: “Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is history” (Ortega y Gasset, 2002: 217) with definitions that state that human nature somewhat has to do with the ways in which we define our fears. One could give an example that goes back to Cartesian thinking. “I think therefore I am” can be said to basically formulate all our fears of not having our thoughts embody our bodies—or our bodies embody our thoughts. This dialectical thinking is what prevents us from considering possibilities of crossing various thresholds and developing a cognitive awareness of a pseudo-identity. If we go back to Nietzsche, however, we see a re-valuation of all values through the plastic figurations of the pseudo-self. This self is a-historical insofar as its constitution is not contingent on the dynamics of historical change but on the dynamics of crossing thresholds. Says Nietzsche: “Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives” (Nietzsche, 1966: 51). For Nietzsche, the profound spirit, otherwise aiming to be free, follows a historical trajectory when it masquerades fear into knowledge.

Kochhar-Lindgren, who follows closely in Nietzsche’s footsteps, puts it this way:



There is a profound fear, in transepochnal culture, of becoming incorporated into the Borg or of being attacked by the monsters spawned by technics, but, on the other hand, this is a moment of opportunity, for as Guattari argues, “A machine assemblage, through its diverse components, extracts its consistency by crossing ontological thresholds, non-linear thresholds of irreversibility, and creative thresholds of heterogenesis and autopoiesis.” We *are* the aliens, we are *already* other, and the work of the *hetero-* and the *auto-* must be enacted, with as much panache as we can muster, keeping in mind that the logic of such a move must deal not with an imitation of the human form, much less an ideal Platonic form, but with a technologic of production that wills the perfection of nature along certain of its axes. (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2005: 127-128; author’s emphasis)

If we pause to ponder some of the words in this passage, written by means of borrowing “ontological thresholds, non-linear thresholds of irreversibility,

and creative thresholds of heterogenesis and autopoiesis,” we may conclude that some prevalent ideas passed down to us from the German Romantics are clearly obsolete. In spite of the Romantics’ effort to elude the traps of dualism, when Herder for instance, declares in 1774 that “The body is the symbol, the phenomenon [the real manifestation] of the soul in contact with the universe,” he presupposes that there is no threshold to be crossed, and thus finds himself caught in another master’s house. This house is however haunted by the notion that symbolism must sacrifice expression in the name of interiority. I suggest that what Kochhar-Lindgren is positing in his demand for the enactment of the ‘already’—“we are already other through the workings of *hetero-* and *auto-* which must be enacted”—is the idea that in cyberspace there is only exteriority and singularity mediated by the dissolution of (symbolic) form. Hegel, for instance, in the first volume of his *Aesthetics*, defined the *symbol* as “an external existent given or immediately present to contemplation, which yet is to be understood not simply as it confronts us immediately on its own account, but in a wider and more universal sense. Thus at once, there are two distinctions to make in the symbol: (i) the meaning and (ii) the expression” (Hegel, 1975: 303-304). For cultural theorists such as Kochhar-Lindgren, cybernetics offers a third element that supplements Hegel’s dialectics: the idea that “we are all temps.” A symbol in cyberspace, especially the ghost, consists of meaning, the expression, and the untimely (Kochhar-Lindgren, 171). Even chronologically, it takes time to get from the Ah! of existence to the Oh! of death.

But before I move on, I should, ah, mention that in Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, the grey zone occupied by the ghost is circular. His book is paratextually ‘signed’ by Nietzsche who autographs the beginning singularly and the end by proxy: Thus spoke ‘Nietzsche’ in the epigraph to the introduction: “The most concerned ask today: ‘How is the human to be preserved?’ But Zarathustra is the first and only one to ask: ‘How is the human to be overcome?’” And thus spoke ‘Zarathustra’ in the epigraph to the conclusion: “Higher than love of the neighbor is love of the farthest and the future; higher yet than the love of human beings I esteem the love of things and ghosts. This ghost that runs after you, my brothers and sisters, is more beautiful than you; why do you not give him your flesh and bones?” Oh, between Nietzsche and Zarathustra it is all Gray.

## **Another**

Quite a considerable amount of literature has been written on Melville’s story “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (1853). However, only few writings are dedicated to considering the relation between the character Bartleby and a cyborg. (I am thinking here of Klaus Benesch: *Romantic Cyborgs: Authorship and Technology in the American Renaissance* (2002).

Benesch discusses however Melville's "Dollars Damn Me" rather than Bartleby). In Donna Haraway's definition, a cyborg is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, 1991: 149). While the idea of cyborgs populating the American Renaissance exhibiting transcendental and Romantic concerns may seem far fetched, the truth of the matter is that authors such as Melville have been preoccupied, not to say obsessed, by the dialectic between nature and technology. However, if the Romantics considered the link between organicity and mechanization they did so by means of still looking for the sublime. This latter concept has undergone significant changes, and in the current age of the posthuman, the sublime has more ontological rather than symbolic implications. For a cyborg the sublime is a manifestation of a beatific state embodied by extensions such as prostheses that mediate between the desire brought into the machine and the singular experience that this desire yields (see for instance the work of Cypriot cyborg performance artist Sterlarc). As Klaus Benesch also puts it, the link between "cybernetic images" of man-machine in early nineteenth-century literature enters "more of a symbolic than an ontological lineage with their postmodern, posthuman relatives" (Benesch 2002: 27).

The reason why Bartleby is an interesting figure in this relation is because he embodies several contradictory states. Each of these states violates the other. After having acted as a automaton (which represents the first level of embodiment)—copying the same type of legal documents again and again—he discharges himself of his duty, not by refusing to work as such, but by assuming a position of enunciating a preference based on contingency. When the narrator of the story, who is also Bartleby's employer, asks him whether he *will* not continue with his work, Bartleby always delivers the same automated answer: "I *prefer* not." Though Bartleby speaks in the name of his preference, which in turn bespeaks him, the subject who speaks (I prefer not to) and the subject who is spoken of ("I" as the body that prefers not to) are never identical.

Cultural theorists such as Mules and Kochhar-Lindgren would identify Bartleby's predicament as that of a subject who has already joined the Borg by positioning himself in the context of the already Other, the already Alien enacted by heterogenesis and autopoiesis. The more Bartleby articulates "I prefer not to," the more the body becomes inert. This inertia can be seen as a moment of crossing over into ethereal immortality, which Bartleby experiences by becoming a ghost by proxy, an extension of the already Other language embodied in the phrase "I prefer not to." In his essay "Bartleby, or on Contingency" (*Potentialities*, 1999) Giorgio Agamben advances the convincing claim that the grammatical value of this sentence (a negative plus an infinitive), which traces and marks incompleteness, creates a space called "potentiality" and enables Bartleby to transcend both existence and

nothingness. In Agamben's scheme, a potentiality is not just a potentiality but also a potentiality for the opposite. Bartleby thus actualizes and realizes at the same time Nietzsche's project of overcoming faith in grammar.

The phrase "I prefer not to" had already become a ghost, haunting Bartleby's colleagues who had started using it themselves quite unconsciously. While Bartleby finally dies from a violently slow death induced by inanition, insofar as he prefers not to eat, his "I" as the subject that kept enunciating itself in a potential state of becoming manages to transcend the limits of finitude. As Bartleby's singular statement stands out from the beginning, it nevertheless proliferates within multiplicity—it haunts all the others. This turns Bartleby's death into a secondary experience: his death is not an absolute death but what remains in experience after Bartleby has abandoned Being. Insofar as Bartleby's death is mediated by the creative language machine, which in its folds is capable of making space for potential states rather than their actualization, it becomes a platform for other events to take place, such as becoming ethereally immortal. It is to this state that Bartleby's narrator makes an anticipated reference when he contemplates doing something for him: "I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him. It was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach." The difference between Bartleby and the narrator here is that, unlike Bartleby, the narrator is unable to cross a creative threshold and imagine on his own what Bartleby's motives for his behavior are.

Warwick Mules states: "Creativity [...] begins from the contingent, the specific—wherever one begins. It takes as its starting point the medium of expression in which objects are made apparent in their singular 'givenness' to perception" (Mules, 2006: 77). Melville ends his story with the narrator's double exclamation: "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" adding to the feeling not only that Bartleby has gone to meet his maker—himself, that is—in that space of autogenesis and autopoiesis—but that in the process he has also turned himself into an object apparent in its singular givenness to the perception of a virtual world, which the narrator cannot see. Or prefers not to.

## **Other**

Kathy Acker's story thematizes some of the same concerns with subjectivity, a body which refuses to embody subjectivity, and a desire for ethereal immortality. A female, yet unnamed, narrator begins to narrate a moment in her life associated with the inevitable pain following an abortion. This pain is however suspended insofar as the event takes place in a dream.



I got married when I was very young. I did not know my husband...

The day after our wedding, I had a dream about the world:

At the entrance to the world, I was about to have an abortion.

I had had abortions before this.

I had to decide whether or not I wanted an anaesthetic. I guess that the doctor had asked me, but I don't remember that anyone was there. Thinking, I asked how much the abortion was going to hurt me. The doctor replied, "Oh, there'll be pain..." in a voice that was trying to dismiss such pain. Since I knew that that type of voice meant that there would be a lot of pain, I chickened out. The blanket that was lying on top of me was yellow. I hate pain. I decided on anaesthetic.

All through the abortion, I was kind of conscious. While I was in this consciousness, a pillow, which was around my ass, inflated and I floated three feet up above the cot.

After the abortion, my body was OK, so I left the hospital.

This was the scene of my marriage. (Acker, 1992: URL)

This passage sets the tone for the way in which the narrator shifts between narrative moments. One is tempted to say here: thus spoke Nietzsche:—pain is the true metaphysical reality—insofar as Acker can be said to subversively re-interpret Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. If pain, for Nietzsche, is the most powerful aid to mnemonics, as well as the main condition of all forms of creation, for Acker, pain is the experience of a metaphysical dream. If, for Nietzsche, pain reflects the burden of biological existence, for Acker pain is linked to the annihilation of existence, to death. In dreams, our metaphysical reality is transformed into metaphysical illusion, a form of death that is not final but delayed by the presence of ghosts. In Acker's first dream—which specifies moments of which the narrator is conscious and hence can relate in a coherent way—we also find other dreams recounted either as they occur, simultaneous with the moment of telling, or as they are retold in hindsight. The simultaneity of narration at this second level is marked through direct speech and dialogue (usually between the narrator and her husband, Steven). The dialogue in turn launches other dreams, which are then retold. These dreams follow both conscious and unconscious patterns and are the expression of fragmented feelings. What the narrator is interested in is the extent to which she can formulate what the body feels independent of cognitive subjectivity.

As the “I” of the narrator deliberately situates itself outside reality—events take place in a virtual space—what the “I” embodies—the dream—becomes an object subjected to an autonomous sphere of knowledge. In other words, when, what, how, and if the body knows, the narrator will tell. This structure is followed by a “Masturbation Journal” in which the narrator provides entries for three days. So, the dreams are not only about telling and retelling stories, but also about writing. Just before the journal entries the narrator assesses her own position in relation to the stories told and in relation to her husband, who always wants to know how they end. Writing is thus anticipated by a call on the language of the body to disclose its secrets. Writes Acker:



I’ve begun a journey to make sex live, to find the relation between language and the body rather than this sexuality that’s presented by society as diseased.

My body seems to reject ordinary language.

If I can find the language of the body, I can find where sex is lying.

While I masturbate, I’ll try to hear the language that’s there.  
(URL)

The narrator’s approach to searching for the language of the body so that she can locate sex points to the necessity of channeling experience through a singular moment that dissolves form (or rather the faith in grammar). This can be seen in the way in which the journal entries are put together, both at the level of form and content. The entry for “Day 1” begins with a sentence in parenthesis: “(This might not make any sense)” and is followed by a couple of other lines emphasizing movement and expectation. These lines have a performative character insofar as they lead straight into another sentence which can be read as a comment on movement and expectation: “there is nothing: it is here that language enters.” “Day 2” begins with this line: “It starts with bodily irritation, but then one has to forget the body, leave the body, leave the body until the body quivers uncontrollably.” While the body is here rendered incalculable, it is also seen as a space with levels, but no dialectic. In its singular existence, the body does not belong to the text; rather it belongs to a textual multiplicity. In cyberspace the body is all about networking and regeneration, rather than system and reproduction (Haraway). This interconnectedness is what enables the narrator to offer descriptive images of some levels of the body. Likening the body to a room, she states:

“

In this room, everything hangs out: nipples scrape against air; buttocks thrust out so that the asshole is open, and all that was inside is now outside

now it starts. it: actual touching. This is the beginning of feeling.  
(URL)

The beginning of feeling is also marked by multiple choices. This is illustrated in one of the lines in the journal entry for “Day 3,” which states: “While crossing the threshold, language is forbidden; having crossed, it’s possible to have language.” The threshold here can be seen as Félix Guattari’s threshold of irreversibility. Guattari plays in an interesting way with some of the signifieds of the signifier threshold in his *Chaosmosis* (1995): liminality (limen = threshold), but also margin, outskirts, here in the sense of being cut off by interruption. One could say that precepts and affects are outside the notion of having “faith in grammar” insofar as they are not bound up with any preconceived subjective content or objective form. They are characterized by a singularly liminal quality, insofar as they are able to cross thresholds and map potentialities of both, death and existence. Says Guattari: “There is an ethical choice in favour of the richness of the possible, an ethics and politics of the virtual that decorporealizes and deterritorializes contingency, linear causality, and the pressure of circumstances and significations which besiege us. It is a choice for processuality, irreversibility and resingularization” (Guattari, 1995: 29). Once the crossing over is done, what is left behind is only the essence of the articulating/or silent body. Whichever we prefer.

One of the passages in Acker’s text that more clearly takes the question of ethereal immortality into account is the dream in which the narrator, her husband and two other women, one of them a countess, discuss the other two Hungarian countesses: Klara and her niece Ezebeth Bathory. These two 16th century historical figures have entered our cultural consciousness alongside characters such as Dracula and other vampires.

“

“Klara Bathory had married four husbands in succession. She had murdered the first two. Afterwards, she took a lover who was much younger than her...”

Steven returned.

“She smothered the boy in castles. Then, a pasha captured him; while the former was skewering and roasting him on a spit, the entire garrison raped Klara. They cut through the throat of the woman who was still living.

“It is a violent society.”

“Klara’s niece was Ezebeth Bathory, more well known as The Scarlet Witch.”

“She murdered almost 610 young women,” her secretary added.

“Yes, she kidnapped young girls in order to get their blood.”

“No.”

“She hung them up by their wrists, then whipped them until their tortured flesh was torn to shreds.” My husband spoke for the first time.

He, the Countess, and her friend were sitting together on a small sofa. I was perching on an armchair.

“Oh yes, and she clipped their fingers off with shears,”—the Countess.

“Pierced their nipples with needles, yes, then tore out the tips with silver pincers,” my husband.

“Because human blood is an elixir,”—the Countess.

“...she bit them everywhere and pushed red hot pokers right into their faces...”—my husband.

“No!”

“And with the curses of witches...,” said the young girl,

“And with the curses of witches, especially the sorceress Darvulia Anna, cut off pieces of their flesh, grilled them, then made them eat parts of their own bodies,”

“Go on go on go on.”—the girl.

“Kissed their veins with rusty nails,”—the woman whom I had desired.

“Go on go on go on,”—her lover

“...and when the young girls parted their lips in order to screech, she plunged the flaming rod into the caverns of the throats...” my husband began taking over...”

“No!”

“Your wife is very much in love with you, isn’t she?” the countess asked him.

“How does the story end?” my husband replied. (URL)

While the narrator takes active part in the telling of this story based on the practice of Ezebeth Bathory who bathed in the blood of young virgins so that she could stay young and alive (a practice which Acker only alludes to), she also indicates at the end of the story that she feels this and other stories are all being talked to death. By exclaiming that she doesn’t want sexuality, she articulates a preference for precisely that stage where the body enters a relation with what it prefers not: to be vampirized by language. In a parallel that recalls Nietzsche, it is interesting to note that in the 1962 film *The Slaughter of the Vampires* (directed by Roberto Mauri) the role of Bram Stoker’s protagonist Professor van Helsing is here replaced by a Professor Nietzsche. This suggests a catachrestic relation between annihilating the vampire’s eternal recurrence by using a hammer and the real Nietzsche’s notion of philosophizing with the same weapon; for the latter the vampire even has a name, Spinoza, as we are informed in *The Gay Science* (372). In a cultural studies context we can further observe that Nietzsche’s proclamation: “God is dead” is often echoed in pronouncements such as “Dracula is dead” (*The Brides of Dracula*, 1960), thus suggesting the irony in having the immortal overcome by the mortal.

As Acker’s story ends with someone named Rodney waiting for her “beyond a door marked by a black O,”<sup>1</sup> which is also the last line in her story, it is clear that what the body prefers not to is also to continue being a body in any real sense. If we were to paraphrase one of Nietzsche’s most condensed and charged maxims: “Man is something to be overcome,” we could say that the body, in both Melville and Acker is also something to be Overcome. What is further suggested in Acker’s story is that in order for Rodney to be able to wait, the narrator would have to hold a promise that potentially she will cross over through the hole, suggested by the letter O. This roundness which we also find in *Bartleby*, when the narrator makes a consideration of his former employer’s name, John Jacob Astor,<sup>2</sup> is the name Acker gives to her objective: to become immortal by placing her body in care of the ghost in the dream machine. The “Ah” in Melville and the “O” in Acker each constitute moments of singular expressions that eradicate language structures by undoing the NO, or O. (Nietzsche nods).

<sup>1</sup> This may be a reference to *Histoire d’O*, which was a controversial erotic novel published in 1954 about sadomasochism by Anne Desclos under the pen name Pauline Réage. The novel has been accused of representing women in an ultimately objectified position.

<sup>2</sup> “The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion” (URL).

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a review of

*Romantic Poetry*

*and the Fragmentary Imperative*

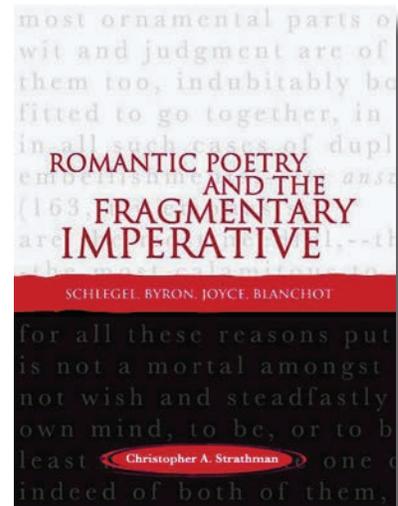
by Camelia Elias

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# Romantic Poetry

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***Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative:***

***Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot***

**Christopher A. Strathman**

**SUNY 2006**

**by Camelia Elias  
Roskilde University**

**A**pproaching the fragment means not only engaging with shifting points of view, but also with half points of view, or fragmented ones. If the fragment demands anything, it is that the reader supplies the other half, but only by 'halves,' as it were, as a reading by 'wholes' would go against the intent, or the imperative of the fragment. This is what makes the fragment interesting, and this is also the reason why we talk about the fragment in terms of its having agency. There is thus a "fragmentary imperative," a "fragmentary demand," a "fragmentary urgency," and so on. Whenever I approach the fragment through other writers on the fragment, I always anticipate seeing that authors, besides offering a synthesis—if it is an academic work that I am reading—also perform through the fragment—in spite of the academic more descriptive than performative constraints. The fragment calls, offers itself in parts, and demands not undivided but divided attention. This is yet another interesting feature of the fragment.

I am writing a review of Christopher A. Strathman's book *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative: Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot* (2006), and the idea that first I have to present a chronological structure of what he is doing in his book, and then synthesize his thought, resists me. It goes against the intent of the fragment. So I don't start with summarizing dutifully the gist of Strathman's arguments chapter by chapter. Not yet. There is something else that the materiality of the book I'm leafing through demands that I pay attention to. First, there is the title: too long, yet in spite of its tedious descriptiveness, it manages to work, as it is placed against the background of some random writing on the cover. This writing *sous rature* is not only superimposed by Strathman's title, but it is also a fragment divided by a color scheme: in the upper part the writing is gray on white; in the bottom part, gray on black. The words that don't spill over the margin of the cover and which I can read are ornamental parts; and judgment; too, indubitably; to go together; all such cases of; embellishments; all these reasons; a mortal; wish and steadfast. The random words can even be said to make some sense, at least if one is looking for sense. The desire to make these words cohere is somewhat enforced by the fact that Strathman's own name is encircled by a red orbiting-like bubble. So, there is a certain circularity at work in the aesthetics of Strathman's book. I open the book and I am pleased to see that the first writing is also a fragment in the form of an epigraph whose content clearly conspires with the cover to seduce. Strathman's epigraph is unusually long, but particularly the first and the last sentence from Foucault are worth quoting. I leave the middle out. "It is a widely held belief that modern literature is characterized by a doubling-back that enables it to designate itself [...] The subject of literature (what speaks in it and what it speaks about) is less language in its positivity than the

void language takes as its space when it articulates itself in the nakedness of 'I speak'." Here is Foucault, expressing a point of view about the ability language has to occupy a void, get undressed, and address, not only its own nakedness, but also that of others. The subject who speaks is always a fragment in context, insofar as it speaks through other fragments. The context of the fragment, in other words, here and now in Strathman's book, is dialogue.

Christopher Strathman's fabulous achievement in his book is to point not only to the fragment's ability to create and rely on dialogue but also to subvert dialogue. The operative argument in Strathman's book is the notion that Romantic poetry, by articulating a demand for fragmentary exigency and by making a case for the fragmentary imperative through irony, at the same time consolidates and subverts the tension between narrative and lyrical forms of expression. What makes Strathman's book engaging from the beginning is the fact that one has the possibility to follow with him the consequences of tearing narrative apart and letting the lyrical mode take over. Although Strathman never mentions the word, it is clear that the figure of the prophet informs the smashing of rules in the four authors he writes about: Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot. Schlegel's notion of *romantische Poesie*, which can also be formulated as a slogan à la 'death to narrative' is traced through Byron's don Quixotic/don Juanism where the dialogue between the two dons can be perceived as a duel, a funeral, and an exhumation of bodies. Between madness and love is a fragment of prophetic literariness. The fragment will come, and the last kingdom of narrative order and linearity will be replaced by dismemberment. Quite literally, Strathman's Socratic echo, "philosophy [...] teaches one how to die," (75) leads the reader to consider the bizarre circumstances surrounding Byron's own death and particularly the incident regarding the exhumation of his body. In 1938, Byron's tomb was opened in the presence of 40 witnesses, though only 4 got a close glimpse at his dead body. In the report of A. E. Houldsworth, the church warden, on what they saw, we notice a focus on the seemingly inexplicable detachment of Byron's leg from the rest of the body:

“

...we were able to see Lord Byron's body which was in an excellent state of preservation. No decomposition had taken place and the head, torso, and limbs were quite solid. The only parts skeletonised were the forearms, hands, lower shins, ankles and feet, though his right foot was not seen in the coffin. [Houldsworth later wrote biographer Elizabeth Longford: 'His right foot was detached from his leg and lay at the bottom of the coffin.'] The hair on his head, body and limbs was intact, though grey. His sexual organ showed quite abnormal

development. There was a hole in his breast and at the back of his head, where his heart and brains had been removed. These are placed in a large urn near the coffin. (D. Wallechinsky & I. Wallace, *People's Almanach*, 1875-1981)

This fragment of trivia serves here to illustrate the relation between narrative (I'm telling a story) and its lyrical effect (Wow!). What interests Strathman throughout his book is tracing the value of Wow, which in Joyce is translated as Woa! Fragments have 'values,' which is to say that fragments situate themselves between primary linguistic articulation and eloquent narrative formulation. As he puts it in his analysis of Joyce: "narrative is a function of the more primordial condition of language; as spontaneous lyrical outburst or even a scream; from this standpoint, the narrative is lyricism subdued or brought under rational control" (131).

What informs Strathman's next chapter, his analysis of Joyce's works (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the focus is primarily on Stephen Dedalus's dealing with the fact that his mother is "beastly dead"; *Ulysses*, where the focus is on "erection *in articulo mortis per diminutionem capitis*," or the Jew, Leopold Bloom, who is neither Apollo, nor Dionysus, or else he is both at once; *Finnegans Wake*, where the focus is on being in the "unbewised again," or being at the dead foot of the text demanding: "Text: open thy mouth and put thy foot in"), is Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. There is already irony at work here, in Strathman's choice of a Nietzschean text which has in its title the notion of birth, rather than death, death being something that he is more interested in. Following Schlegel's injunction against traditional modes of narrative—in his formulation of an antigeneric genre which allows the freedom of the poetic language to situate itself outside narrative—Strathman points to the ironic way in which Joyce in *Ulysses* is obviously concerned with testing the limits of Romantic poetry by exhuming the already dead. Says Strathman: "One of the most notable (even alarming) qualities of the "Sirens" is the way in which the language of the episode embarks on a many-sided mimicry of the one-sided narrative voice, as though the narrator loses control and the bottom of language falls out (in a vaguely Nietzschean way) while individual words, phrases, scraps of songs, and fragments begin to display the buried life they secretly tender beneath the flattening effect of narrative" (136). Strathman's pun on the word alarming, here parenthetically inserted, is an attempt at showing the effects of tampering with the "lilting side of language." If in the first two chapters the dialogue between Schlegel's buffoon narrator and Byron's fool narrator occurs through trafficking language by evading the narrative police, the Joyce chapter sounds out the potential robbers waiting by the road to highjack language. As every writer falls prey to the slipping of his tongue, Strathman frequently uses particularly these two verbs: to traffic

and to lilt, thus indirectly suggesting that the literariness of *romantische Poesie* shoots through sound patterns without paying attention to traffic lights. Woa! Joyce not only roams the limits of Romantic poetry, but he also extends its poetics. Says Strathman again on Joyce's thought that informs both Schlegel and Byron's work: "the fragmentary forms often entail not only a formal experimentation leading to what one might call indeterminacy or openness, but that such forms also embody a quasi-ethical imperative: that to think and to write in such a way is to remain responsive to what remains unthought in thinking" (106). The fact that Strathman does not pursue the implications of a potentially full fledged ethical demand shows that he is aware of the fact that where the fragment is concerned, there are only quasi and half viewpoints that can express anything worth expressing about the space of literature. As he makes clear, Joyce's text "provides the stimulus of the enigmatic for his reader in the form of thousands of fragments and endless shifts in point of view, compelling her to become a more active coworker in the production of what one could (loosely) call meaning." (148)

In his last chapter on Blanchot, the Romantic enigmatic, loose, amateur, fool, incompetent, or wanderer ironist engages fully in what interests Strathman from the outset: the "transversal" and "horizontal" moves that do not "fall vertically" outside meaning and its place in literature. Transversal moves indicate a concern with passages, as the name of his chapter also suggests: "Blanchot and the Quest for the Passage to the Outside." If traffic, pilgrimage, and lilt are the operative verbs and nouns in the previous chapters, in the analysis of Blanchot, Strathman is interested in litter, or remains. Blanchot is not a radical prophet of the same caliber as Schlegel, Byron, or Joyce, but a prophet nonetheless. Whereas for the latter three the fragment in itself is radical, insofar as it suggests that its condition is contingent on a break from some imaginary or otherwise whole, Blanchot is a prophet of inflection. The fragment, for Blanchot, is not broken off from some totality but bent. There is totality and what spills over. It is in this sense that the fragment must be thought of as being not merely a ruin but also a remains which takes issue with what remains to be thought: excess. Whereas ruin suggests death, there is also always a potentiality at work in the fragment as ruin: something new might be born out of the ashes. In this sense, both death and birth can be said to be the most common forms of excess, thus what remains; remains as excess and excess as remains. In his *Visions of Excess* (selected fragments 1927-1939), Bataille posits that there is a symmetry between excess and remains as a strategy to gain personal sovereignty. You are only at the mercy of narrative as long as autopoiesis enacts itself as mercy. Thus the fragment of self that one tells oneself about oneself is bound to be a radical one. Literally the most radical form of fragmentation must be the kind that usurps voice and talks things to death. Joyce understood that. And so did Blanchot.

Whereas Strathman does not make a clear distinction between degrees of

radicalism and what creates them in the authors he discusses, he does say that where Blanchot is concerned, the fragment for him is “a more radical kind of writing, thinking and living” (152), thus supplementing writing with two more elements: thinking and living. By way of pointing to the importance of Nietzsche’s writings for Blanchot, Strathman shows that the Romantic idea of a fragment’s forever becoming comes short of accounting for the topography of poetics and literariness. The Romantics’ commitment to the celestial sublime in their theory of the fragment is crushed down by Blanchot’s notion of “disaster,” which puts into play the space of literature as it is created by exigency and imperative. At this point we can recall Joyce’s imperative, which can also be taken as an affirmation of the fact that Text is, first and then: “Text: open thy mouth and put thy foot in.”

Blanchot, I suggest, is a latter day Zarathustra, a radical prophet of radicalizing repetition—the repetition of the authority of “I speak” (as in Foucault). What we have in Blanchot is not only an engagement with binary opposites, Apollo vs. Dionysus, part vs. whole, hollow vs. holy, but a formulation for a model of knowledge which relies on what lies outside. Blanchot’s trope for the outside, the idea of “disaster” as a vehicle for the outside, can be explained through the observation that disaster is beyond our reach. The effects of disaster, what remains, enters in a circuitous repetition of the question—Blanchot’s question: “is man capable of a radical interrogation?” (155). Strathman inadvertently suggests an attitude towards this question by referring to Blanchot’s discussion of Herman Melville’s short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” In this story disaster occurs at the moment when the protagonist, Bartleby, creates confusion and crisis at the office where he works, by repeating a formulaic line whenever he is given a task to perform: “I prefer not to.” I suggest that this line becomes Bartleby’s Text, which opens its mouth, but only to enunciate a renunciation of “the authority to speak,” as Blanchot suggests. Bartleby’s Text puts its foot in by trampling on the task. “I prefer not to” becomes the space of literature as fragment, or Woa! As Strathman rightly remarks, the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary imperative is thus constituted not only by the opposition between narrative and lyrical modes of expression but also by “[t]he responsibility of literature [...] to hold open space for just this possibility” (175).

Strathman’s book offers a clever vision of how the Romantic fragmentary imperative calls irony into play to spill itself over the margins of totality. Lo and behold, the prophets would say, there is a fragment, step on it! Strathman philosophizes with the shoe on, leveling the point that the dialogue among Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, and Blanchot creates a vital connection between beginnings (out of nothing), their articulations (into nothing), and their performativity (beyond nothing). Where Strathman’s style is concerned, I formulate here an imperative by making a Nietzschean affirmative gesture: in a future work, can we have more puns, ruinous, disastrous, prophetic?

a review of

*Pure Pagan:*

*Seven Centuries of Greek Poems and Fragments*

by Emily Faurey, CUNY Graduate Center

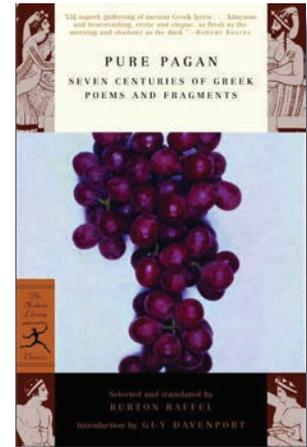
*Hyperion*, Volume II, issue 3, October 2007

HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

# Pure Pagan

a review of

## 7 Centuries of Greek Poems and Fragments



***Pure Pagan:***  
***Seven Centuries of Greek Poems and Fragments***  
**Edited and translated by Burton Raffel,**  
**with an introduction by Guy Davenport**  
**Modern Library, 2005**

by Emily Fairey  
CUNY Graduate Center

If translating ancient Greek literature is difficult, translating Greek lyric poetry is truly Sisyphean. Anyone who would render these fraught and fragmentary lines into English while creating a lucid and original poetic effect walks a fine line between twisting the text to a personal agenda on the one hand, and being slavishly literal on the other. Disparate and varied elements such as choice of words, grammatical and metrical sense, and attention to cultural context, are all essential factors. Finally, it is necessary to address issues of reception and accessibility. What is the ultimate purpose of the translation? Is it a student's first introduction to the genre, a radical re-interpretation designed to shock and amaze, or an exhaustive scholarly aid? These are just some of the questions and problems that beset the would-be interpreter of ancient Greek lyric poetry.

The motive stated in the introduction of this small yet varied selection of Greek poems, edited and translated by Burton Raffel, is a worthy one—to present a representative sample of the large body of Greek lyric poetry that usually goes unnoticed by the average reader. To an extent, this slender, un-intimidating tome does a fine job of selecting Greek poems and making them accessible by means of translations that are poetic in a modern idiom. Yet there are fundamental errors in this book, in the areas of selection, translation, organization, and approach. The organization of the poems is one of the biggest problems, since although it is easy for the untrained reader to cope with, it is misleading.

Arranged in alphabetical order, by poet, each poem is given a title (the addition of the editor). There is no biographic information included in the chapter headings; rather one must consult an extremely brief table at the end of the book to get any contextual information about the time or place of a poem's creation. The 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE Alcman, a Lesbian (and possibly Dorian) lyric poet, is followed by Antipater of Sidon, a late 2<sup>nd</sup> century poet of the near east city of Sidon. Of the latter, we are only told, "nothing is known of his life." At least this much is said, whereas the context of the Hellenistic "anonymous" works that make up the *Greek Anthology* of the Alexandrians, of which more is known, is not even mentioned. Although we do get some slight explication of the *Anthology* in Guy Davenport's introduction (p. xv), this is stated as in a vacuum, removed from the poems themselves. Clearly, Raffel does not want to disrupt the poetic flow of the book by overburdening it with scholarly apparatus. He says as much in his translator's preface: "I have not attempted to make historical sense of this largely fragmentary and haphazardly preserved mass of song. When so few people still know, today,

what the dates and the sparse fragmented biographical details mean, dates, and biographies seem to me largely irrelevant” (p. xxv). Nevertheless, a small biography of each author could easily have been included at the chapter heading of each poet. When nothing was known of the author’s life, at least some historical context could have been given. Additionally, the inclusion of an occasional footnote would be quite helpful, especially with the a-contextual one-line poems that occur so frequently. Sometimes the context of a Greek lyric poem is much more interesting than the poem itself. Yet this is exactly what Raffel avoids, creating the impression that “seven centuries of Greek poems and fragments” demand as little contextualization as the poetic efforts of a contemporary college literary magazine. I cannot agree with Raffel that the context of the poems is irrelevant; to me it seems that by excising it, he creates a false impression of the integrity of this body of work.

Since Raffel wishes to avoid organizing the poems chronologically, one option might have been to arrange them by subject matter, since he sees fit to tell us the subject of each poem by imposing a title. For example, one of the strongest aspects of the little book is its collection of funeral epitaphs and epigrams, a truly representative literary sample. My favorite of these is a poem from the *Greek Anthology*, here entitled “Aristo” (p. 20) that tells the story of a young bird hunter, now dead. This is a nice translation, as well as a fine example of the concise, descriptive irony of this Hellenistic genre. *Pure Pagan* contains many other funeral epitaphs by authors as far ranging as Simonides and Kallimachos. Yet there is barely any recognition that they make up an independent literary type; they are simply bundled in with the rest.

The poems range from works by the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE Spartan and Lesbian poets up to those living in far-flung Greek-speaking provinces of the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. Although some of the poems are fine choices because of their greater length, standard of preservation, and artistic quality, many extremely brief excerpts, or truncated fragments, are included. These lack poetic as well as historical interest, and Raffel’s reason for including them escapes me. For instance, a selection of Alkaios, the 7<sup>th</sup> century lyricist of Lesbos, creates a false tone of authority on the subjects of “philosophy” (p. 9). Composed solely of the line “Nothing will come of anything,” this aphorism exudes an artificial sense of modern poetic brevity and existentialism. In fact, this poem is an excerpt of a larger, lost work that may have had absolutely nothing to do with “philosophy” at all. Likewise, a truncated poem of Terpander entitled “to Apollo” (p. 70; Page-Lobel fr. 1.1) that reads here “Sing me, my soul/sing the far ranging lord,” was originally preserved only as an excerpt. If Raffel gave any of the contextual information that is supplied with its gloss in the *Suda*, the reader would find that the fragment exemplifies a certain type of song that began with the Greek “*amphi-aeido*,” a formula so often used that it gave rise to a verb *amphiaeizein*, which simply meant to write a song beginning with that word. As it is rendered in *Pure Pagan*, one completely

misses this formulaic aspect. Even more to the point is the lack of any real poetic interest here.

Other selections are fine poems in the Greek but lose far too much in Raffel's modern-poetic style of translation. Although in some cases he conveys a poetic sensibility and delicacy that is pleasant and smooth, he does not always give a coherent sense of the impact of the Greek language of the poems. The content of the Greek is clearly subordinate to his goal of subsuming the poems into his personal style and evoking a certain mood of quasi-Hellenic reverie. For instance, in one lovely poem of Alcman, (*Poetae melici Graeci fr. 89*), here entitled "Sleep" ( p. 17), he returns five times to the refrain "are asleep," describing a beautiful natural landscape. Raffel has achieved an effect somewhat similar to the original, which also contains an element of hypnotic repetition. He loses, however, the strongly evocative visual and ecstatic impact of the Greek, replacing it with a mere laundry-list description of natural features. "Headlands and cataracts" are omitted from the description. In describing "the creeping things out of the dark earth, and the beasts on the hills" Raffel leaves out the crucial verb "*trephei*" (nurtures), and thus the earth, so actively alive in the Greek, becomes a mere house for the animals. "Exotic beasts in the deeps of the purple salt" becomes simply "monsters deep in the sea." Finally, the birds, "the races of long-winged birds" in the Greek, are here no longer long-winged, but simply birds.



heudousi d' oreôn koruphai te kai pharagges  
prôones te kai charadrai  
phula t' herpet' hosa trephei melaina gaia  
thêres t' oreskôioi kai genos melissan  
kai knôdal' en benthessi porphureas halos: (5)  
heudousi d' oiônôn phula tanupterugôn.

Raffel's primary interest in *Pure Pagan* is not to give to the general reader a real sense of the color, shading, messy contradiction, and multifarious variety of Greek lyric poetry. This would be too intimidating. Rather, he attempts to make his material accessible and imbue it with simplicity. This approach lies behind the impression of the "modernity" of the language and the monochromatic illusion of the Greek cultural *ethos*. His approach is reminiscent of that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century German Romanticists, who used the Greeks to further aims of nationalism and originality, creating the artificial image of the Greeks as unified cultural elite who consistently surpassed Latin efforts over the centuries. Likewise, Raffel here presents the Greeks and their poetry as something easy to digest, with very circumscribed themes that any picnicker trying to get some peace and quiet out of the city can comprehend.

Guy Davenport, in his introduction, celebrates paganism as a bucolic ideal by his suggestion that the Greeks considered the country superior to the city and that this idealization of country life was the primary catalyst and subject of Greek lyric. I think this is by no means evident, even in the selections given by *Pure Pagan*. Consciousness of the *polis* and the public identity of the citizen were much more of a wellspring of identity in the ancient world than a nebulous worship of nature, in spite of the fact that Samuel Johnson defined pagan as “living in the country” (p. xiii). In fact, the idealization of rural existence was one theme among many in Greek lyrics and was inextricably bound up with the concept of city life as quintessentially human, civilized, and necessary. I feel that Raffel’s selections and translations reflect a modernist ideal for the ancient Greeks, one which almost certainly never existed except in our minds. Nevertheless, if the only way for most readers to approach a body of work so messy and daunting is through simplification and idealization, perhaps this is better than missing it altogether. Ultimately, *Pure Pagan* is a pleasant read, and a relaxing if unchallenging pleasure-trip into a usually tempestuous, exacting, and mysterious field.

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a review of

*Anxious Pleasures*

by Walter H. Sokel

*Hyperion*, Volume II, issue 3, October 2007

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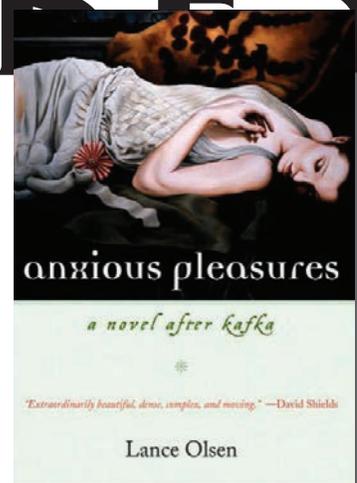
*Anxious*

PLEASURES

***Anxious Pleasures***

**Lance Olsen**

**Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007**



**by Walter H. Sokel**

Olsen's novel is basically a re-telling of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, but significantly enlarged and expanded, and thus much more than a mere re-telling. Yet by also attempting to re-tell Kafka's famous story, Olsen has set himself a daunting task. Ostensibly vying with Kafka, he stacks high odds against himself. Olsen's reader will, initially in any case, ask the question: Why tell again what Kafka has already told so superbly well? Upon the reader's most careful reading, re-reading, and reflecting upon Olsen's text, the question will in all likelihood receive a very satisfactory answer. Olsen's is a thought-provoking novel.

Apart from the considerable enlargement of and significant additions to it, the retelling of *The Metamorphosis* itself proceeds with great narrative skill and delightfully ironic humor. Olsen follows the plot and represents the characters of Kafka's story with a faithfulness of detail that gives the reader, familiar with Kafka's text, joyful chuckles of recognition. Beyond that, the reader gets to know the familiar characters more intimately than in Kafka's original story. For Olsen reverses Kafka's narrative perspective.

That Kafka narrates from a unimental perspective, i.e., from the point of view of a single character, has often been observed and become a commonplace of Kafka criticism. We get to know the other characters only as the single figure whose point of view carries the story sees and experiences them. They themselves, their inner lives, remain inaccessible to the reader. Olsen, on the other hand, lets all the characters, except Gregor, reveal themselves to us directly through narrated inner monologue and dialogic statement, and he presents all narrated happenings through their minds. Thus the reader gets to know the characters more intimately and fully than they appeared when shown solely through Gregor's mind. Olsen's writing acts as a transparent medium through which Kafka's characters seem directly to speak to us, their readers.

Though somewhat more fully developed, the characters largely confirm the view we get of them in Kafka's text. Gregor's sister's, Grete's, relationship to Gregor, however, acquires a complexity surpassing that in Kafka's story. She is certainly the most many-hued and interesting figure in Olsen's version, in which Gregor himself remains largely obscure, and she is also for the reader the principal informant on and observer of her brother's mystifying behavior. Olsen adds some additional characters, such as a Jewish neighbor of the Samsas, topically named Frau Klinghofer, and a humorously drawn occasional boyfriend of Grete, named Herrman. By giving him the name of Kafka's father, Olsen makes a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the closeness of father and daughter in Kafka's tale.

As already mentioned, Gregor himself, who, for reasons not clear to this reader, is also called Uwe in the latter part of the story, remains mysterious. His inner life is withheld from us and we do not get to know his motivations at all. The most striking deviation from Kafka's original story is the absence of its core event—the metamorphosis itself, Gregor's miraculous change into a huge verminous body. Olsen's text never mentions a metamorphosis and several passages clearly preclude the protagonist's transformation into a non-human shape. Instead *Anxious Pleasures* describes, through the observations of the other characters, a process of withdrawal by Gregor, first from his firm when he fails to report for work, then from his family, from taking care of his appearance, from visibility—"nothing," empty space, tending to take the place where Gregor had been expected—from corporeal being, finally from being, from life itself. At one point, as in Kafka's original text, he seems to attempt to rejoin his family scene and show himself, seemingly drawn by Grete's violin playing, but when that attempt is cruelly rebuffed, he, even as in Kafka's text, withdraws to his room to die.

There is a strange stage in that steady process of withdrawal that has no parallel in Kafka. It is Gregor's apparent abandonment of his sex, his masculinity, his de- or transgendering, which meets his sister's eager encouragement and excited complicity. In fact, she seems intent on seducing him to speed up his un-sexing, while seeking to make love to him. By contrast to Kafka's narrative, the thought and desire of sibling incest here issues (proceeds) not from Gregor, but from his sister. Perhaps it is this scene to which Olsen's title *Anxious Pleasures* refers with special relevance.

In the end, however, Gregor does not permit his sister to continue and further explore their "pleasure." He withdraws even from her, toward absolute isolation, toward non-being.

It constitutes a turning point for Grete. Slapping her uncooperative brother in wounded disgust, she henceforth turns from caregiver into would-be executioner who will eventually insist on his final disappearance even more vehemently than "Papa." Thus Olsen provides an additional motivation for Grete's turnabout. Added to her injured pride as an artist, when Gregor shockingly interrupts her violin playing performance for her parents and the lodgers, is the hurt of the rejected lover, the accomplice in anxious pleasures.

The function or meaning of Olsen's fundamental change from Kafka's original—the omission of its crucial event—centers on the role played by metaphor. In Kafka metaphor becomes event—fictional reality. Gregor feels like a bug, he becomes a bug. By taking away this metamorphosis of metaphor, Olsen removes a central part of the magic, the expressionist or surrealist, and eminently modernist, element of Kafka's story. Thereby, however, he paradoxically "corrects" Kafka along Kafka's own explicit

wish. Kafka made it very clear to his publisher that he wanted no pictorial representation of Gregor's transformation whatsoever. Thereby Kafka showed that his character's metamorphosis should be seen as a purely inner or psychic event, not an external, visible, and miraculous one. So, in a sense, on the plane of narrative representation, Kafka himself violated what he had categorically ruled out in pictorial terms. By enacting Gregor's physical metamorphosis in his narration, he pictured, i.e., externalized what was to be understood as a purely inner tendency, a mental or emotional occurrence. Eliminating any reference to a corporeal metamorphosis, Olsen restores Kafka's own intent when he ruled out any visible representation of his hero's transformation. In a sense, Olsen "outkafkas" Kafka. Staging Gregor's change as a solely inward withdrawal, he fulfills Kafka's demand on the narrative level, which Kafka himself had violated when he shows Gregor actually transformed into the creature he feels he is.

The two most significant additions in Olsen's telling of the story are the intrusion of the socio-political dimension, and a subplot dealing with the reading of Kafka's story and reading in general. I shall call this subplot the reader's plot.

The political dimension is represented by a perpetual and world-wide war with terrible effects on everyday life. Gregor's sister, Grete, for instance, permanently limps as a consequence of an injury caused by modern warfare that does not spare civilians. Both father and son in the Samsa family have had to serve in the war and our sympathies for Gregor's father are awakened when Gregor's mother, referring to her husband's life in the trenches, says that he has "seen things no man should have had to see, heard things no man should have had to hear." The war has been raging for generations. It covers the globe. In the father's memory he had been at the front in Burma. The war is alluded to in terms of both World Wars of the twentieth century. It includes trench warfare and bombing of civilians. The war is all-embracing. It occupies the center of life. The three lodgers refer to it. "Since the invasion (whatever that may be) our work has become more vital" they boast.

Reasons for and causes of the war remain utterly obscure. The enemies are referred to only as "the bastards," "the barbarians," "the natural disasters" without any further identification. The enemy appears dehumanized and deserves no specific characterization. The consequences of the war, however, are ubiquitous and catastrophic. It imposes a stifling bureaucracy on everyday life. Forms have to be filled out for buying "day-old bread." As a political phenomenon accompanying the war, black shirts calling themselves "White Resistance," evoke echoes of Fascism. The prevailing mania for uniforms gives rise to a humorous statement by Grete's boyfriend, Herrmann: "Hatred always being a fashion statement at the end of the day." Meanwhile, the butcher boy, a minor character familiar from the concluding section of Kafka's

text, decides to deliver cat meat “to the Catholics, dogs to the Yids.” A lively trade in pets’ meat requires printed instructions on “the best way” to slaughter dogs.

Does the protagonist’s withdrawal from life reflect the war? Is it reaction to a world out of joint? Neither the individual nor the social receives any illumination. Like Gregor’s metamorphosis, as told by Kafka, and Gregor/Uwe’s withdrawal in Olsen’s re-telling, the war finds no explanation. Like the hero’s story it remains a conundrum. As presented by Olsen, Gregor’s deterioration mirrors the political-social turmoil of a world from which he withdraws. Comparing Olsen’s version to Kafka’s, the reader wonders if the parallel between individual and global fate does not rob the former of the magic uniqueness it has in Kafka’s story, subtracting from it the powerful existential horror of Gregor’s fate. It is precisely its uniqueness that makes Gregor’s story, as told by Kafka, so horrifying.

Yet, on the other hand, its parallel in a perpetual, equally unexplained war adds a dimension of relevance particularly to our present moment in history. Olsen’s version makes Gregor Samsa’s tale an illustration of a general slide into chaos. It does make the protagonist’s withdrawal from life quite understandable. It depicts human beings as entropy. Entropy is literally alluded to in statements such as “resources run down,” “bad becomes worse,” “zeppelin(s) go up in billowing flames” and “little fiery droplets of crew (fall) from the sky,” as the lodgers read in the papers while smoking their cigars.

The other important addition is the reader’s plot. It centers around a young woman called Margaret, living in contemporary London, and her attempts to read and understand or, as she calls it, “wrestling with” Kafka and her visits to the British Museum Library where her relationship with Timothy, a security guard at the Library, begins. Dealing with reading, and particularly reading Kafka, the reader’s plot exemplifies the ironic self-referentiality of Olsen’s novel. For what else is his re-telling Kafka’s masterpiece but a “wrestling” with Kafka’s text? Margaret, as a reader of Kafka, is an ironic self-reflection of her creator as the writer of a novel that is, to a large part, a reading of Kafka. Olsen’s novel can be viewed as an attempt to write fiction as reading fiction. It is a “wrestling” with Kafka. We shall come back to the comic parallelism, as well as the play of contrasts, between the reader’s plot and Olsen’s novel as a whole. The former is comparable to the satyr’s play following the performance of a Greek tragedy.

Writing as reading is also writing as interpreting. The most striking instance of that is Olsen’s connecting Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” with *The Metamorphosis*. In Olsen’s version, Gregor has an older brother Georg who was a hunger artist before the advent of radio displaced hunger art as mass entertainment. In making Gregor Samsa the younger brother of Kafka’s hunger artist and by

naming the hunger artist Georg, Olsen performs a shrewdly penetrating act of interpreting Kafka's *oeuvre*. Georg, the hero of *The Judgment*, Kafka's classic tale of the son's suppression by the father, was the immediate forerunner of Gregor in Kafka's *oeuvre*. Both texts were written in the same season, the autumn of 1912. Given the chronological sequence of the stories and their thematic closeness, Georg can literally be seen as Gregor's older brother in Kafka's opus. Making Gregor's older brother the hunger artist reflects a penetrating cross reading of Kafka's works. The relationship between *The Metamorphosis* and "A Hunger Artist" is indeed a very close one and Gregor can be seen as a junior, i.e., more naive, non-exhibitionist kind of hunger artist. In Kafka's story, Gregor is said gradually to lose all appetite for earthly, corporeal food and nourishment. He practically ceases to eat and dies as a "naive" hunger artist, one not self-consciously exploiting and exhibiting his lack as an achievement. He thus represents an unself-conscious more child-like forerunner of the Hunger Artist, his "younger brother." A psychological and existential development in Gregor becomes "art," systematic achievement, a kind of "maturity," in the Hunger Artist. Olsen expresses this likeness and difference in terms of brothers differing in age. The introduction of the hunger artist Georg into the Samsa family shows Olsen's fiction as an apt interpretation of the interconnectedness of Kafka's narrative world. It is a subtle and persuasive illustration of writing as perspicacious reading.

To a large extent, Olsen retains the sacrificial savior and rebirth myth of the rain king whose death redeems his community. As I have tried to show in my essay "From Marx to Myth," this myth underlies the ending of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. In Kafka's story, the ending, subsequent to Gregor's voluntary dying and no longer told from his perspective, stages the rebirth of his family, now freed for a new life by Gregor's self-removal. Significantly the family's hope for a new future, vested in Grete's budding body, coincides with a return of spring. Gregor's *de facto* suicide, forcefully suggested and insisted on by his sister, thus retrospectively bestows upon his transformed existence a "beneficial" meaning paralleling the Christian variant of the rain king myth. Olsen's version takes over this pattern and elaborates the rebirth of the family's spirit in great detail, hinting at the reawakening and continuing of life by allusions to Grete's nubile body. The coinciding of the kindling of hope in the family with the awakening of spring is at the center of the scene. In keeping with his broadening of Kafka's story into the socio-political dimension, Olsen tends to universalize the myth, envisioning a rebirth of society and a possible ending of the war. The universal celebration of the city acquires overtones of the Dionysian. At this point it should be remembered that we owe to Olsen a splendid novel about Nietzsche.<sup>1</sup>

In Olsen's version, the myth loses an essential aspect that connects Kafka's *Metamorphosis* to the story of Christ. For unlike Kafka, Olsen does not show us Gregor's deliberate consent, his decision to die. Olsen's text does not

<sup>1</sup> Read "The Bardo Thodol of Friedrich Nietzsche," Rainer J. Hanshe's review of Olsen's *Nietzsche's Kisses*: <http://nietzschecircle.com/review8.html>. Also available on the NC website: "The World of Words: Ghostwriting with Lance Olsen," an interview with Lance Olsen conducted by Rainer J. Hanshe: [http://nietzschecircle.com/interview\\_olsen.html](http://nietzschecircle.com/interview_olsen.html).

allow insight into Gregor/Uwe's mind and thus gives us no sign that Gregor deliberately sacrifices himself. We are left with Gregor's being sacrificed by his family but not sacrificing himself. In this telling, the myth reverts to the pattern of the rain king, but loses the allusion to its Christian variant. Gregor is a mere victim without the dignity of a tragic hero and redeemer to which Kafka's tale raises him.

In Olsen's telling, the myth is further undermined by Grete's attitude. In the myth, Gregor's parting is to lead to the regeneration of his family in new love and hope. Grete, through her body, is the carrier of this hope. However, in Olsen's version, Grete holds the whole idea of family in low regard. "In the end, family" she thinks, "exists for no reason other than leaving it. This is the secret everyone keeps from you." Grete plans to exclude her parents from her life. She resolves to look for a flat of her own in which she would be sole possessor of the key and not share it with her parents. "Papa and Mutti," she thinks, "may not appreciate my decision at the outset, but they will get used to it." Not an auspicious beginning for the rebirth of the family. Grete's skepticism toward the idea of family makes Gregor's sacrifice quite questionable. Given Grete's thoughts, one cannot hold much hope for the future of the Samsa family—quite an ironic deviation from the idyll projected by Kafka's ending of the story. In Olsen's version, the family, by sacrificing its member, negates, while pretending to regenerate, itself.

A further ironization of the myth lies in the questionableness of Grete's supposed emancipation. Grete's "maturing" is also shown as a backsliding, a retrogression. Grete seems to regress emotionally into a little girl. Despite her show of rebelliousness, she also submits slavishly to Papa's authority—an ironic parallel to her brother's metamorphosis from breadwinner to utter dependent.

The supreme example of ironizing the myth of rebirth lies in the parallelism established between the plot of *The Metamorphosis* and the reader's plot of *Anxious Pleasures*. In both a displacement occurs. The renewal of life through sexuality displaces the subject of each story—Gregor Samsa in the former and the activity and concerns of reading in the latter. As the prospect of marriage and progeny opens up at the end of Kafka's story, Margaret's preoccupation with reading ends in a budding love affair with Timothy, a security guard in the British Museum's Library. Beginning their relationship by discussing Kafka, they end up a quasi-engaged couple of lovers. Life triumphs over reading as it triumphs over Gregor. Thus an analogy emerges between Kafka's protagonist and the act of reading. Rebirth, the rejuvenation of life, seems to demand the elimination of such extravaganzas as Gregor's strangeness as well as that sphere of privacy and inwardness to which reading consigns us. By the same token, Olsen ironically devalues the myth of the rebirth of life by coupling it with the budding of a banal love affair, grouping it with what looks very much

like kitsch. The paralleling of the fates of Gregor and of reading constitutes a prime example of the ironic self-reflexivity of Olsen's novel in which writing as reading seems to project its own fate of being superseded in turn.

This connects it to the anti- or counter-myth, which Olsen juxtaposes to the rebirth myth of Kafka's story. Significantly the anti-myth occurs in the concluding part of the reader's plot when the reader, Margaret, suddenly remembers her grandparents whom preoccupation with reading has made her forget. The anti-myth deals with the approaching end of the grandparents. It is in a way the opposite, the answer to, the myth of rebirth of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. It is an ending not in rebirth and Dionysian expansion, but in relentless contraction, the losing of all physical and mental ability, a horrifying story of disintegration and entropy. This gloomy and sobering answer to the jubilation with which Olsen's re-telling of Kafka's plot ends receives heightened significance by originating in the "author"—the "author" being Kafka himself who as their neighbor lives one flight below the Samsa family.

Yet this cynical and melancholy anti-myth is not the last word either. It is devalued or relativized in turn as a mere dream annulled by waking up. Olsen's text ends indecisively without any final and conclusive "meaning." Both the Samsa and the reader's story end suspended in mid-sentence. The act of narration, not any "meaning" or message derived from it, literally has the last word. Narration stops without conclusion. It is nothing but itself, the act of narrating. There is no "meaning" to be distilled, no "answer" to be gained, merely the act of raising questions. The goal is withheld, the search remains, accompanying the reader as she parts from the text. Olsen presents us with Kafka turned eminently post-modern. That is no mean achievement.

*Anxious Pleasures* does not yield easy emotional identification. On the contrary, it frustrates and alienates its reader, leaving her suspended like Olsen's final sentences. It presents itself as obscure and off-putting. By that same token, however, it calls for and urges upon us a questioning, a re-reading, a renewed reflecting again and again. Then, gradually, it opens its riches.

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Yves Bonnefoy:

A Selection of Poems in Translation

Translated by Mark Daniel Cohen

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HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

*Yves*  
*Bonnefoy*

**A Selection of Poems in Translation**

**Translated by Mark Daniel Cohen**

## Here, Still Here

Here, in the site of light. No longer dawn,  
But long to day with dicibles desires.  
Mirage melodic reverie remains  
But scintillation's stones to be transpires.

Here, even to the eve. The rose of shades  
Will turn to tick the walls. The rose of time  
Will noiselessly detone. The shining slabs  
At will will pace today enamored strides.

Here, still here, still. Stones upon the stones  
Have cobbled up the country of recall.  
So hardly sound the simple fruits to fall  
Enfevers yet in you time goes to heal.

# Theatre

## I

I'd see you quicken on the terraces,  
I'd see you wrestle at the wind,  
The cold cut blood your lips.

I've seen you break broad breathlessly at being dead, More Beautiful Than  
Lightning, when lightning lacquers blank panes with your blood.

## II

Senescent summer chapped you with its drab, a monotone of joy, we scorned  
the scarred intoxication life's.

"Rather ivy," you would state, "adhesion to the stones of night: presence  
without outlet, face sans root.

"Last pane delighted nail sun's decimates, but rather in tor village in to die.

"Rather wind..."

## III

It was a question of a wind that stiffer than recall,  
Stupor gowns' and crying stones'—and you at foreflame flew,  
Head Cartesian ruled hand flue wide all  
In quest of death on drums pulserunning of your gesturings.

It was the daylight of your breasts  
And finally you reigned and in absentia from my mind.

## IV

I wake, and rain. The wind is spearing you, Douve, coniferous and moor in  
dormancy by me. I'm at terrace, in a pit of death. In leaves of great dogs quail.

The arm you lift, alarm, to door, it lights me down the ages. Village of the  
embers, I each instant see you born, Douve,

At each instant die.

## V

The arm you lift as well the arm one turns  
Are to a time but to our dullness wits,  
And but with drawn the drapes verdure and mud  
There rests remain but flames of kingdom Death.

The leg unvested where the loud wind stabs  
Ahead it driving headlong rainheads thresh  
Will light to limen you come kingdom's hold,  
Douve's gestures, slowly gestures, gestures black.

## VI

What pallor mints you, river underdown, what artery of you explodes, where  
echo of your fall rebounds?

The arm you raise at sudden splays, takes flames. Your face recurls. What  
brumal densing wrests me your regard? Slow escarp of shades, frontier of  
death.

The mute arms bower you, an arbor of another shore.

## VII

Casualty confounded in the leaves,  
But baffled by the blood of passing paths,  
Yet to live's abettor.

I've seen you beached aback the battle's end  
To diffident aporch to silence, waves,  
And mouth astain with stars finality  
To crack acry the dread, your night's surveil.

Oh, lift to hard air sudden like a rock  
A gesture lovely as of coal.

## VIII

The song's absurd commences in the hands and in the knees, then the  
crashing in the head, the lifting lilt below the lips, and its conviction lace the  
versant underground the face.

At present time is out of joint the joinery of face. At present time is ratcheting  
the wrenching out of view.

## **IX**

White below the insect ceiling, bad light and at profile phase,  
Your gown in spite by venom of the lamps,  
I discover you extent,  
Your mouth aloft above a river detonates far off, on earth.

Being discomposed put to by being indestructible,  
Presence recomposed in torch of cold,  
Oh watcher, ever I disclose you dead,  
Douve: Phoenix, I am watchkeep in this cold.

## **X**

I see Douve extent. The height of carnal space, I hear her rustling. Black  
princes race their mandibles through space where hands of Douve unskain,  
bones unfleshed of their intertwine web grey arachnid massive lights.

## **XI**

Covert: silence: humus of the world—  
Toiled: the rays arachnid of alive—  
Already: in submit to slip to sand—  
All: for knowledged four-slit secrecy.

Invested for the festival of non  
And teeth undraped as if it were for love,

The fountain death, mine, present, unendure.

## **XII**

I see Douve extent. In the scarlit city of the air, where combat branches battle  
fore her face, and where the roots rout passage to her mass—she rays delight  
an insect shrill and in the horror song.

Apace ablack and of the earth, Douve, ravage worn, ecstatic, rejoins the gnarl  
lamp of the tablelands.

### **XIII**

Your face this evening lighted by the earth,  
And yet I see your eyes to putrefy  
And word face is no longer of a sense.

The inward sea's alight by eagles' turns,  
This is an image.  
And I hold you cold to depths where images unfix.

### **XIV**

I see Douve extent. In a chamber ivory, plasters circle undereyes, the mouth  
gone gyre, and sentence hands to lush of grass; the grass incursions her on  
every front.

Door opens. Orchestra advance. And eyes of aspect, gemcut, flue to thoraxes,  
luxuriant, the heads cold billed, of mandibles, are inundate to her.

### **XV**

Oh, indued with profile where earth's dead set,  
I witness you undo.

Bare grass on your lips, the lit of flint  
Compound your final smile.

At deep lore frit  
The antique bestiary of the mind.

### **XVI**

Household of a humble flame, where our declivities collide! Below the vault, I  
view you dawn, still Douve, catch death net perpendicular.

Douve ingeniuised, in invert: apace of suns through space funest, she slow  
makes her assent to nether ranks.

### **XVII**

Ravine pries at the mouth now,  
Five fingers fan haphazard in the forest now,

The first head flows through grasses now,  
The gorge decored with snow and wolves and now,  
The eyes give vent on those the voyagers of death and it is we in wind in  
water in the frigid now.

### **XVIII**

Precision presence that no flame could ever hitherto restrain; conveyor  
of secluded cold; alive, of but that blood reborn and blown by poem self  
decimates.

It was needful that you thus appear upon the deafen margins, at the funest  
where where your own lucency wears worse, that you suffer trial.

Oh, most lovely and your laugh it's death insteps! I dare now to convene with  
you, I can sustain the flame commission at your gestures' light.

### **XIX**

Initial day of cold, our head escapes  
As if a convict flee to atmosphere,  
But in an instant Douve that arrow dive  
And shatter at the ground the palms of crown.

Thus would we reincarnate our commit,  
But head gainsaid we cup a water cold,  
And sheaves of death are ticketing your smile,  
Attempted cleft in denseness of the world.

# The Salamander

## I

And now you're Douve in summer's chambered last.

A salamander flickers on the wall. Its fleece and human head sheds summer death. "I want to founder to in you, slim life," Douve cry. "Lightning vacance, run my lips, come run me through!"

"I love mine own selfblind, to sift to me to earth. I love no longer knowing which cold teeth mine own."

## II

Through night I'd vision ligneous of you, Douve, better by to feed you into flame. Green statue wedlocked bark, the better by delight in your ignescent head.

Between the digits weigh debate between the igneous and lips; I saw you cast me smiles. Though broad daylight you ember blind to me.

## III

"Regard me, and regard me, I have run!"

I'm near you, Douve, and I let light your way. Now nothing stands between us but this lithic lamp, small shade assuage, our hands the shade await. Salamander start, you dwell in immobility.

Have lived the instant in the fleshest near the most to hand transmutes to knowingness.

## IV

Thus, would we keep wake upon the peak of night of be. There thicket gave.

Concealed erupt, by what blood bird did you cut rounds our dark?

To chamber which did you rejoin and where the horror of the dawn wore worsen on the panes?

## True Name

I will name desert castle what you were,  
The night, the voice, the absency, your face,  
And when you'll plummet in the sterile earth  
I'll nomenclate nil lightning's carted you.

To die a countryside you loved. I come  
In infinitely on your dimlit ways.  
I decimate desire, your form, recall,  
Your enemy and pitiless to be.

I will denominate you war, I'll seize  
The liberalities of war and have  
In hands your face obscurancy transpierced,  
In heart this country storming lumifies.

## **True Corpse**

Line the mouth and with it wiped the face,  
And expurgate the corpse is and innate  
Illuminating fate in earthen speak,  
Most lowly wedlock come to consummate.

Slay that voice that used to to my face  
While we disheveled and disseminate,  
Immured these eyes: and I hold have Douve dead  
In Herbheit an sich with me cribbed again.

However chill may be that mounts of thee,  
However scorch intimacy our glance,  
Douve, I do speak in you; you I embrace  
In action of to know and of to name.

## Passing Fire

I passed by fire beheld in vacancy  
Hall shuttered tight and out extinguished light.

And I saw it burned still, and even was,  
And at an instant, at the point of poise  
Between the acts of ash, of embering  
At which to fire the option to desire  
Which whether wild or waver to embrace  
Of who she has seduced into the couch  
Of fragrant lambent grass, of broken wood.  
He is the bend of bough I brought into  
A yesterday, so quickened summer rain,  
He memories a Hindu god's regard,  
With some solemnity's initiate love,  
Of she who would of he who'd be encased  
By lightning anteceding all the worlds.

Tomorrow I will sift  
This fire near full to frigid, it will be  
Without doubt summer day the such as sky  
Endows all rivers, those that of the earth  
And melancholy coronary floods.  
The man and woman, know where to what time  
Their ravel flame is braiding or deduced?  
What wisdom modest in them is foreknows  
Within a falter diffidence of light  
When cry of bliss will curl the scream of throes?

Fire of Mornings,  
Breathing of two beings who repose,  
The arm of one enshouldered to the two.  
And I who have be come  
To bring to air the hall, to bring to light,  
Arrest, I sit, I give you my regard,  
An innocence of members into spray,  
Time packed so thick with time it's stopped to be.

## **Thus, Will We Walk**

Thus, will we walk wide welkin wreckages,  
The land of distant will to realize  
As if a destiny in living light.

The courtly most of countries longly sought  
Will etch before us salamander earth.

See, you'll state, this stone:  
It portals to propinquity of death.  
Secreted lamps in flames beneath our means,  
Thus, we walk with light.