



HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

Vol. XII, No. 1 (2019)

FEDERICO
GORI

DANCE:
SANNA KEKÄLÄINEN

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

FRITZ SENN ON JAMES JOYCE
JÓSEF J. FEKETE ON SZENTKUTHY

DURAS INTERVIEWS BATAILLE

STAN BRAKHAGE
CHRIS MARKER

➤ MORE

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Publisher: Contra Mundum Press

Location: New York, London, Melbourne

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Hyperion is published biannually

by Contra Mundum Press, Ltd.

P.O. Box 1326, New York, NY 10276, U.S.A.

W: <http://contramundum.net>

For advertising inquiries, e-mail: info@contramundum.net

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FULGUR PRESS

Ira Cohen: Into the Mylar Chamber

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



William Burroughs and His Gilded Cobra

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

PRAISE AND REVIEWS

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



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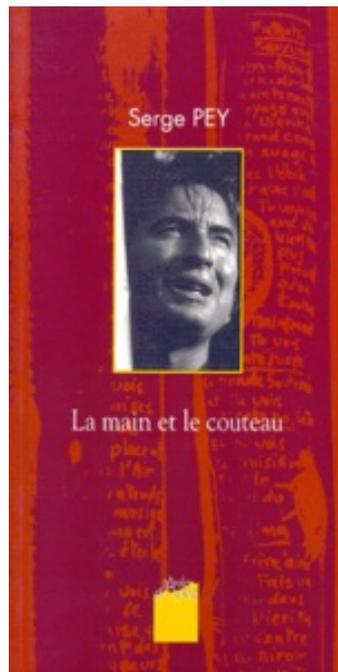
SERGE PEY

ALCHEMY OF THE VERB: PREFACE BY ADONIS

AROUND ATOMIC BIRDS: Interview with Thierry Renard

CHERNOBYL:

Oral Poem for the Men and Birds of the First Alarm



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

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

ALCHEMY OF THE VERB

PREFACE BY ADONIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

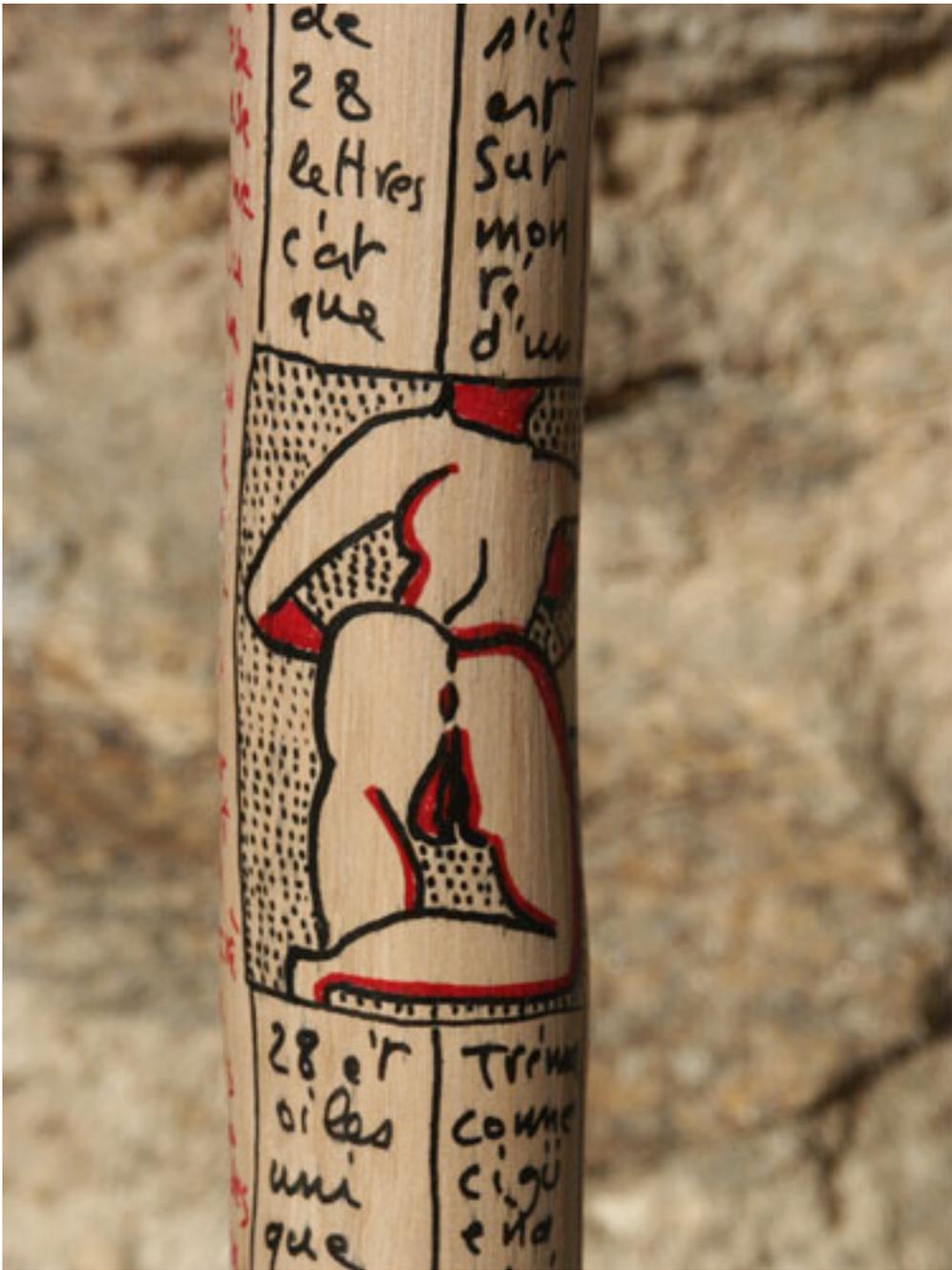
Pey's poetry tells us that the relationship between man and his body is essentially tied to the relationship he maintains with the universe, and these relationships are integrated into one and the same surge. This way, the poem, whether read aloud or heard, is nothing if not a call to ecstasy, to immersion

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

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



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





AROUND ATOMIC BIRDS

Thierry Renard Interviews Serge Pey

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴ Book of Judges 12.

*You recite poems with your feet?*⁵

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

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

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

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

What is poetry?

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

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

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

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

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

How did it all begin?

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

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

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

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

Mallarmé?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A myth of poetry or poetry as myth?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A tragedy?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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