

Delusion 2.0;

Harry Partch and the Philosopher's Tone

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Japan Society, Dec 7, 2007

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I believe in many things; in an intonation as *just* as I am capable of making it, in musical instruments *on stage*, dynamic in form, visually exciting. I believe in dramatic lighting, replete with gels, to enhance them. I believe in musicians who are total constituents of the moment, irreplaceable, who may sing, shout, whistle, stamp their feet. I believe in players in costume, or perhaps half-naked, and I do not care which half; perhaps only with headpieces, *but something, just something*, that will remove them from the pedestrian, the city-street, the beloved-and-dutiful-son or daughter, the white-shirt-and-tie or evening-gown syndrome.

I believe in Bass Marimbists with footwork as beautiful as that of skilled boxers, in kitharists who move the trunks of their bodies like athletes. I believe in all sounds of the human voice, free from the bel-canto straitjacket. Finally, I believe in a total integration of factors, not as separate and sealed specialties in the artificially divorced departments of universities, but of sound and sight, the visually dynamic and dramatic, all channeled into a single, wholly fused, and purposeful direction.
All.

—Harry Partch, *Statement*, 1960

Harry Partch's (1901-1974) *Delusion of the Fury* is back: a legendary 1960s work as alive and powerful today as it was in the heyday of West Coast counter-culture. In many ways this mature masterwork of hybrid music-theater represents the culmination of Partch's iconoclastic life; employing as it does the majority of his unique handmade instruments, tuned to his system of acoustically pure Just Intonation intervals, and telling a compelling pair of serious and silly humanistic tales by means of dance, vocalizing, movement, music, lighting, and costumes. While almost all his other works have been performed since his death in 1974—either on his own set of original instruments led by Danlee Mitchell and now Dean Drummond, or by John Schneider's West Coast replica set—the music for *Delusion* is especially hard to play. Twenty players, who can commit to months of grueling rehearsals,

must learn a new notation and memorize over an hour of music that has more than enough time-signature changes to demand extraordinary focus. The players must also sing, whistle, stamp their feet, and project visual agility and engagement; this is no pit orchestra or concert recital. It is a lifestyle commitment. And you need to spend years working your way through Partch's smaller and simpler pieces before tackling this one.

To compound matters, three lead actors must bear the weight of the drama and be equally adept at stylized movement, dance, and acting, as well as in possession of extraordinary vocal abilities; thanks to our climate of over-specialized training, performers typically excel in one discipline but are lacking in the total range of abilities required for Partch's integrated art form.

Even if the performers are capable, the management team needs tons of money, shared vision, clockwork coordination and an extraordinary degree of collaboration. Unifying art forms in the West has been an uphill battle for centuries partly because of this; just ask Wagner.

It's a tall order to mount such a work, and anything short of success in Partch's terms is sadly typical yet still lamentable—Partch himself had a long history of less than ideal productions. Even when he was at the helm of a production, his singular value-system was difficult to inculcate in a team of rookie collaborators.

By and large the Japan Society performances December 5-8, 2007, were a prodigious achievement. A new generation of fans (at least the portion that managed to score a ticket to the sold-out, Uptown-priced run of shows) saw the original Partch instruments in all their glassy, woody glory; heard a well-rehearsed band play his fragile, addictive and soulful music; and saw a visual feast of sexy dancers, fluid lighting, and assured actors. You could be forgiven for thinking you had experienced an authentic representation of Partch's vision (and the standing ovations and favorable press reviews attest to that), but he set high standards for his art and the production had a couple of telling flaws. In most cases, a theater work with a few production miscalculations would be forgivable; in Partch's case, any botched element betrays a deeper misunderstanding of his total ideals, and proves fatal.



Act I treats with death, and with life despite death.

Act II treats with life, and with life despite life.

They have this in common: both convey the mood that reality is in no way real: this despite the very different locales, subject matter, and the very different paths toward the awareness of unreality.

Both—essentially—are happy in their focus; the reconciliation with some kind of unreal death makes the one with some kind of unreal life possible.

—Harry Partch, *Scenario for Cry From Another Darkness* (aka *Delusion of the Fury*), December 30, 1964

Delusion of the Fury (originally entitled *Cry From Another Darkness*) is a dramatic work of ritual music theater in two sections: a tragedy followed by a comedy. As such it follows the ancient Greek practice of linking a tragedy with a less tragic but still poignant satyr play immediately afterward (just as Partch had done with his settings of the *King Oedipus* tragedy followed by the bathetic *Plectra and Percussion Dances* in 1952).

The acts are based on a Japanese Noh play (*Atsumori*, as translated by Arthur Waley) and an Ethiopian folk tale (from the book *African Voices*, edited by Peggy Rutherford). Yet despite their exotic origins, they are intended as directly relevant to contemporary life: Partch, for instance, often brought up ancient Greek myths in everyday conversation—the stories were alive and immediate for him. Although he is best remembered for his homeless wanderings during the Depression and the works based on hobo life of that period, Partch was globally minded long before multi-culturalism was fashionable. He set texts of Chinese poet Li Po in the 1930s, but *Delusion* was his only major dramatic work using non-European material.

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I am drawn to the Oriental attitudes because, in the Orient, there has never been any great separation of the theater arts, therefore no need to conceive of integration... I should emphasize that I do not think or plan on the level of reproducing anything, but rather in terms of revitalization of the over-specialized Western theater, through transfusions of old and profound concepts.

—Harry Partch, Proposal to the Ford Foundation to spend a year in Japan, Dec. 8, 1962

Partch wanted integration among the art forms, a literal, relevant, powerful *Gesamtkunstwerk* that speaks directly to our lives and human condition. The abstract, European arts he felt were symptomatic of losing touch with our whole selves and compartmentalizing our multi-faceted roles in life:



[I want to] be aware of the total potential of any human involvement. The musician as dancer, the dancer as ditch-digger, the ditch-digger as physicist, the physicist as hobo, the hobo as messiah, the messiah as criminal, or any other conceivable metamorphosis.

—Harry Partch, *No Barriers*, 1952

He complained that we go to the opera and get singing, the ballet and get dance, a concert and get music, drama and get words: “basic mutilations of ancient concepts.” How much more powerful would the experience be if we were struck by them equally, all at once?

These ideas are fused in his notion of One Voice—his version of a “Unified Field Theory”—that has as its kernel the facts of basic acoustics. Small number ratios (such as described by Plato and Pythagoras) are the purest form of tuning musical intervals, and by happy (but debatable) coincidence, when we intone our speech in heightened dramatic situations, we hit similarly subtle microtonal inflections in the resulting melodic contour: Inflections that the 12 equal fixed notes of the piano cannot even approximate. (Ironically, skilled concert performers on Western string, brass, and wind instruments play naturally in tune—by ear—according to these fine shadings of the harmonic series, yet their conventions and terminology are incompatible with Partch’s nomenclature.)

Rather than take the common approach and have the speech-singing voice conform to the available instruments, he did the opposite; he gave Voice the primary role and constructed the necessary instruments to support it (along with corollary unique notations, rehearsal and transportation difficulties, and the life of penury that ensued). Harmonics, Tuning, Voice (loosely combined under the term Monophony) then became extended beyond the mere articulation of vocal language to encompass the whole body and mind under the term Corporeality. This term not only implies a “body feeling” in performance but also an implication of focus and dedicated mindset, a performance intensity, presence, and charisma that are typically neglected or constricted in routine concert music.

Partch was a musical philosopher and once stated that he was as interested in the “idea” of music as he was by music itself. His works stand as uncompromising expressions of theoretical concepts; equally important as intellectual demonstrations as they are powerful in effect.

Partch saw ritual as a linking element between his familiar worlds of ancient

Greek myths and contemporary America; Ulysses' wanderings were exactly those of his own freight hopping in the 1930s; Dionysian idol worshiping rituals were exactly those he saw in Elvis or The Beatles. The purely formalistic structures that had developed in instrumental music since the 17th century with their own rules of harmony and counterpoint and architectural forms of sonata, rondo, and fugue were anathema

to him because they had no connection with drama or storytelling *per se*.

They were useless to him; they wasted their potential for wholeness. It is one thing to theorize about how art forms should all support each other—his book, *Genesis of a Music*, deals with this—it is another to put it into practice.

During his career, whether he was riding the rails or working with undergrads, Partch's artwork is inextricably linked to the circumstances of his life; it is always autobiographical to some degree. It is consequently tempting to see in the conciliatory tone of *Delusion's* Act I a similarly resigned and mellow Partch at the end of his tempestuous life. It is equally easy to see the hobo in Act II as a version of Partch himself 30 years earlier stating, "But I'd rather be a hobo"; a political defiance against the establishment.

Yet, Partch is no longer around. It is not the 1960s any more and producing any work after the author's death presents its own set of challenges and opportunities. To compound the difficulties, Partch was especially precise and thorough about how his work should be presented and what it should convey. (Where aspects were left unspecified he always provided instructions on the boundaries of acceptable interpretation; guidelines that any producer would presumably want to know.) There is also an absence of a track record to refer to; some Partch works have been performed many times (*Bewitched*, *Castor & Pollux*) so we have a tradition that can withstand a wider range of personal interpretation. In the case of *Delusion*, it was done once and imperfectly at that ("Academically static modern dance and the ultimate nadir in costume



treachery,” as he described it in 1972 to Madeline Tourtelot). Does a revival under such circumstances have a greater duty to be faithful to the artist’s original intent? To set the record straight before future generations reinterpret it? If only to learn what he envisioned for the work?

By analogy, prior to the 1980’s Early Music movement and its advocacy of historically informed performance practice of Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque music, performances of Monteverdi, Bach, and Perotin still took place, but they largely missed the point. They used inappropriate instruments, tunings, and phrasing that bludgeoned the works’ original purpose and sensibility. We are now, thanks to scholarship, in a better position to realize a different aesthetic in musical performance and appreciate qualities absent from the blindly received tradition. The works thus become fresh and new to our ears precisely because we have questioned every assumption and performed them in an un-contemporary way. Fidelity to a work’s idea through an informed reading of the text can be a path to discovery and authenticity; appropriating some of the ideas and taking them intentionally in new directions is something else.

When does a new conception of a work, if it is that at all, actually mask inability and not reveal inventiveness? Nietzsche addresses this symptom rather acutely in “On Style,” aphorism 290 from *The Gay Science*. Here’s an excerpt: “It will be the strong and domineering natures that enjoy their finest gaiety in such constraint and perfection under a law of their own. . . . conversely, it is the weak characters without power over themselves that hate the constraint of style. They feel that if this bitter and evil constraint were imposed upon them they would be demeaned; they become slaves as soon as they serve; they hate to serve.” This seems to address rather precisely the problem with such approaches and a problem of our epoch. Directors think the only way for them to be creative is to mutate however they wish what they are directing because of their inability to achieve the creator’s original vision. If they don’t include their ‘point of view’ they don’t think they are ‘doing anything.’ The result of being rooted in their ego instead of the vision of the work.

So the first questionable statement regarding *Delusion*’s revival comes from the festival director:

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Our challenge was to see how far we could get from Partch’s original creation, yet still remain loyal to his concept—without dropping into the pitfall of mounting a museum piece that even the creator himself would no doubt hate.

—Yoko Shioya, Artistic Director

Are works from the 1960s necessarily museum pieces already? Is Partch's favorite musical, *Hair*, from the same era, less relevant because it is a period piece? Is the original choreography to Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* somehow less powerful because it assumed a different audience culture? The fear that a work may seem "dated" may stimulate a producer to "update" it, but does that solve the problem? Was there a "problem" in the first place? Some works are considered "timeless": who decides?

Here is a piece, *Delusion*, that had never been done totally right, and the director already wants to stretch it away from its roots? This anyhow was the shaky premise for this performance. It takes the hare-brained challenge of separating Partch's concept from his concrete instructions; a path that led to Partch's condemnation during his lifetime and has surely become no more fruitful since.

How then to realize an authentic vision of his canon now that his ashes have been floating off the Santa Monica Pier for over 30 years? There have been several attempts. Currently there are about 1.4 sets of instruments his music can be played on, based in Venice, California (think Muscle Beach and Flower Power), and Montclair State University, New Jersey (think leafy burbs). This original set is led by Dean Drummond who met Partch at the age of 16 and performed with him for a couple of years late in Partch's life—surely a formative influence for any teen.

Everyone takes away from a Partch encounter a different sense, based on the circumstances of the discovery and what resonates with their own latent interests. Ben Johnston, for instance, who knew him in the 1950s, became a sophisticated composer (and teacher) of microtonal concert music. James Tenney, David Dunn, Johnny Reinhard, and Phil Arnautoff likewise had their musical worlds expanded. Others more distant from the source (including Paul Drescher, Skip LaPlante, and me) became sound-sculptors. Few swallowed Partch whole. Dean Drummond developed as a composer, leader of Newband, and ultimately guardian of the Partch instruments through an arrangement with Partch's heir Danlee Mitchell to borrow them in 1989. (Note I didn't use the word "Instrumentarium," a now-common neologism that Partch never used and might have thought designated the tools of his trade as peculiar specimens in glass jars.)

Theater is considered to be a collaborative art form; playwrights, actors, set designers, and directors all work together to mount a production as a collective effort. Partch, however, went farther than most modern authors by not only composing the music but also specifying in detailed and imaginative terms the costumes, characters, movements, and motivations of all the performers. In this regard he is similar to ancient Greek poets who likewise took on the whole

range of production tasks—providing music, costumes and choreographic gestures (*chieronimia*) in addition to the dramatic narrative.

During his life, while he needed people to realize these visions in his productions, Partch (like his near-contemporary, Samuel Beckett) left little leeway for personal interpretation or competing viewpoints. His singular vision and aesthetic led to notorious spats with the likes of Alwin Nikolais (*The Bewitched*, 1957), Joyce Trisler (*The Bewitched*, 1959), and Kenneth Anger (*Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* misappropriated Partch's *Plectra and Percussion Dances* in 1954), who abandoned Partch's instructions and suffered the consequences. Who knows what revenge Partch may have concocted had he seen the recent version of his *Castor & Pollux*, revamped as *Calculus & Politics* and choreographed by Molissa Fenley first at Mills then at the Joyce Theater in New York the week following the *Delusion* production? It would not have been a pretty sight.

Given that Partch's instructions and vision for his works are well documented and easily available, is it possible to stage an authentic production that differs significantly from his concrete instructions? How far can one take the letter of his score and retain the spirit? Does the producer always trump the playwright, or only if he's dead? Could a deliberately "inauthentic" production illuminate hidden aspects of the work, even one we've never seen? When does honoring a work's integrity by realizing and stretching its intrinsic qualities become an irresponsible smash and grab?



The musicians must of course be in costume, and I have a singularly clear idea as to what the costumes should be like as to detail and what they should convey: a sense of magic, of an olden time, but never of a precise olden time. They should certainly not suggest anything that is either Japanese or Ethiopian.

The basic garment of the musicians should be a huge pair of pantaloons, wrapping around the waist in East-Indian fashion. In Act I they should also wear a poncho-like garment—a single, full piece of cloth with a neckhole. It must be completely unadorned, without collages or beads or anything that tinkles in the light. The poncho is discarded at the end of Act I. During Act II the musicians are naked from the waist up.

To compensate for this very simple costume each musician will wear a fantastic headpiece. Each will be different, or frequently different.

In contrast, the three principals would wear more imaginative costumes, and imaginative make-up. Wigs certainly, but no headpieces.

—Harry Partch, Scenario for *Cry From Another Darkness* (aka *Delusion of the Fury*), December 30, 1964

How then did the Japan Society performance of *Delusion of the Fury* match up to Partch's original vision?

“A” for effort, to be sure. The production was professional and clearly the result of hard work, a generous budget, and highly skilled participants. *Delusion* is one of the largest of Partch's ensemble works and certainly the most musically demanding. It was written after a period at the University of Illinois when he had effectively simplified his writing to accommodate ever larger casts of thousands. Away from the pressures of student productions and settled in a Petaluma chick hatchery, Partch could resume his experiments with more sophisticated writing for virtuoso musicians (though he had none at his disposal at the time).

This production also served to put the 1969 UCLA premiere (with its well-known recording and lesser known film version, both on Innova) in perspective. It is always a shock to hear a live performance of a work that you are familiar with only through one recording, and this time was no exception. The notes were the same, but listening in a live setting in an auditorium, the instrumental timbres are more fragile and crystalline than the close-mic setup. You appreciate for the first time what the original Columbia recording engineers did to rebalance the instruments to bring out particular melodic lines. Many of the instruments in their live incarnation have a narrow dynamic range, making it difficult for any conductor to bring out the parts and balance them well, even if—as Drummond was—he were not engaged in playing an instrument himself. Balancing the ensemble thus becomes an exercise in instrument placement on stage, so the quieter ones are nearer the audience and have a greater chance of being heard in *tutti* sections. While the wide spread of the instruments on stage helped the ear distinguish the daemon of each instrument most of the time, the Chromelodeon reed organ and kitharas could have been more prominent at times. One of the kitharas and the Mazda Marimba actually had subtle electric amplification in this production, as Partch had sanctioned during his lifetime, thus allowing instruments to be placed more for visual effect than acoustic projection.

The experience of the Marimba Eroica, however, was superior when “heard”

live. The instrument's tones are so low, you *feel* the vibrations and the pressure in the room rather than hear it with your ears (a “rippling in the backsides by an art form,” as he called this effect). Indeed, the instrument is different in every space, depending on which of the long wavelengths happen to correspond with the depth of the auditorium. This instrument is therefore both a site-specific sound sculpture tuned to its environment and a primal, direct manifestation of what Antonin Artaud strove for in his Theatre of Cruelty.

The fact that the ensemble knew the music well enough to perform essentially without a conductor (apart from a couple of dramatic cues) speaks well of their preparation. It was also an added bonus to the credibility of the drama; the musicians really seemed to be contributing their human presence to the ritual whereas the presence of a waving, directorial conductor would have spoiled that illusion.



The attitude of the musician on stage—what I refer to as *Attitudinal Techniques* in my subtitle—is another failure of music education, and one directly relevant to the age of specialization, the tendency toward even greater purity in the creative arts. *At no time* are the players of my instruments to be unaware that they are on stage, *in the act*. There can be no humdrum playing of notes, in the bored belief that because they are “good” musicians their performance is ipso facto “masterly.” When a player fails to take advantage of his role in a visual or acting sense, he is muffing his part—in my terms—as thoroughly as if he bungled every note in the score.

There is surely some special hell reserved for the player of one of the more dramatic instruments who insists on deporting himself as though he were in tie-and-tails on a symphony orchestra's platform (such as experimental hanging by the gonads on a treble kithara string).

—Harry Partch, *Manual*, 1963

An important part of playing any Partch instrument is how intense and energized you look when you are playing it—the aesthetic quality of your body: “athletic,” “like skilled boxers,” “willing to rape or caress their instruments...” Like *gamelan*, *gagaku*, *pansori*, and Peking opera, the musicians are on stage as live, interactive parts of the action, and therefore should not deny their presence or recede like black holes. Most standard concert ensembles focus on getting the notes right first and see their visual appearance as only a secondary concern. For Partch, this human presence is equal to technical

mastery (the notes, phrasing, etc.) and it takes a lengthy period of encouragement and training to teach players this kind of psycho-physical projection. In the 1980 production of *The Bewitched*, for instance, Kenneth Gaburo spent the first hours of every rehearsal having the performers do mental and physical awareness exercises.



In the Japan Society performance, some musicians were better than others in this regard. Seeing the Bass Marimba player's (Jonathan Shapiro) left hand rise inexorably way up high to the ceiling before crashing down on one of the low blocks, was a thrill, timed to dramatic perfection. Gestures did not need to be exaggerated to be mesmerizing though; the Diamond Marimba player (Bill Ruyle) standing upstage played his fast passages with such casual authority and dynamic balance that you knew this instrument was in capable hands and my eyes and ears were captivated.

In general though, how did the players look? Did they achieve Partch's corporeal ideal? This is where the production fell short. The ensemble sauntered onstage at the beginning, as they might for any concert. What happened to ritual theater, the beginning of spinning a web of intrigue, and ancient magic; the whole point of this activity? It would have been easy to ask them to move in stylized fashion or emerge from the shadows in a simple but intense choral procession (Partch intended them to be the Greek Chorus, after all).

The playing of the first few minutes of string music seemed likewise half-hearted. When the music shifted to the percussion-based instruments stage right, though, the mood took off on a more confident footing. Partch considered the strings to represent the soul and his percussion instruments the body, so the arrival of the dancers on stage was a powerful moment.

This blasé opening and T-shirted costume debacle was apparently the

result of two failures that would have been only too familiar to Partch: a choreographer (Dawn Akemi Saito) who paid no attention to the musicians, and an errant costume designer. These shortcomings had plagued the original production, too (as he made clear to Madeline Tourtelot in 1972 while editing the film of the original production), and make one question the management protocols that allows such blemishes to occur time and time again. Added to that, Dean Drummond's role (the only person on the team with first-hand knowledge of Partch's concepts) was relegated to that of mere Music Director, so bureaucracy determined that he had no influence on anything but playing the right notes. Once again it is shown that decisions made by committee, or with a misinformed boss (even though—having been awarded a MacArthur "Genius" grant—John Jesurun must be one), can lead to mediocrity.

The choreographer's role is usually assumed to be relevant only to dancers, but in Partch's world, everyone is a mover/dancer/actor; the musicians are characters visible on stage and thus demand as much meaningful, intentional, suggestive body movement as anyone else. By ignoring one third of the performers in this production (after the Moving Chorus and the leads), the choreographer (who otherwise did a fine job) should take a 33% pay cut, hang by a treble kithara string, and/or be forced to memorize Partch's extensive writings about "the curse of specialization" in the arts. Partch embeds all kinds of musical interactions between the players and the actors—expressive vocal ejaculations, angry stomping, and mysterious whistling. Without corresponding gestures, these musicians looked straitjacketed. By not paying attention to the movements of the on-stage musicians, the choreographer did both a disservice to Partch and also to the players; she ignored the basic premise of his work and exposed the performers to ridicule.

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For her treachery to the concept the costumer [to the 1969 *Delusion*] should have been tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail...

I did not know, being very preoccupied with the music, what was being contemplated in the costuming and choreographic departments...until the last few days before the performance... Thus the absolute necessity of a period of indoctrination.

—Harry Partch, Letter to Madeline Tourtelot, January 21, 1972

The other tragedy was the fact that the musicians wore basic black shirts and pants—today's casual tuxedo: a suitable uniform for school concerts and waiters but diametrically opposed to everything Partch stood for. Partch railed against "the inhibitory incubus of tight coat and tight shoes" that was the

standard concert attire of his day and insisted on “some visual form that will remove them from the limbo of the pedestrian.” Black T-shirts are the epitome of pedestrian.

There was a reason for this, but no excuse. Apparently the original costume designer (Ruth Pongstaphone) was fired four days before the opening night for producing unsuitable costumes. “Sacred robes for a Thanksgiving parade” was how one musician put it. Even “unsuitable” might have been better than black T-shirts though. Not having seen them, I can’t comment, except that still left four days to find a better alternative. The new costumer was necessarily preoccupied with clothing the lead characters (which she did fine), so someone needed to rise to the challenge and take care of the musicians’ appearance. Partch’s instructions in the score are precise enough: pantaloons, one-piece tunics, fantastic headpieces, and body paint, so when the tops are removed for Act II, the musicians are half naked. None of this happened. Ultimately, body paint with black pants apparently didn’t look right, so the whole idea was abandoned as the clock ran out.

Have attitudes changed that much in 40 years? Are we now in an age of American prudery? Perhaps they reasoned that the original plan might have been all right for California in the ’60s but wouldn’t go over in 21st century New Jersey, where school fees, lawsuits, and parental/student complaints carry more weight than they used to. Has Protestant body shame (Partch’s lifelong nemesis) returned triumphant, even to New York? Is it kosher for the Japan Society to present near-naked Butoh performers one week but anathema for an American drama to do the same the next? Someone is guilty of being over-cautious.

Now surely someone could have figured out in those four days that a hibiscus behind the ear, or bare feet, or a piece of rope tied around the forehead, or a colored shirt could have a similar effect without embarrassing anyone? As it was, the musicians became invisible; their presence as a mystical chorus watching and commenting on the eternal action in front of them became prosaic. More like watching a rehearsal, and not even the dress rehearsal.

In a total art work such as this, all the components make up one whole body; this performance had at least one amputated limb. Directing the musicians, dancers, and actors on stage so they are seen to have mutually supportive interactions is hard enough, but this was a major element jettisoned. Partch was once asked what he thought about “poetry cum jazz.” He felt it needed more “cum.” It did here, too.



There are many fairly long periods where only 6 to 12 instruments are employed, and duets and trios are frequent.

The tacit musicians may thus become actors and dancers, moving from instruments to acting areas as the impetus of the drama requires. For example as court attendants in Act II, bodyguards to the justice.

—Harry Partch, Scenario for *Cry From Another Darkness* (aka *Delusion of the Fury*), December 30, 1964 (Instructions ignored in this production.)

On a positive note, the instruments themselves, their staging, shapes, and materials, were as warm and fragile as ever; giving off a wooden glow, like walking down the corridors of the Queen Mary bathed in rich living wood from around the world. Jeff Nash lit the stage unobtrusively and effectively, balancing visibility of the instruments and the performers nicely.

The Moving Chorus (six dancers moving silently as a group) operates in dangerous territory and can verge off into the forbidden zone of abstract modern dance (Partch's bugbear) at any moment. This group, though, was a model of its kind. With form-hugging tights the young men and women were sensuous, sexy, and engaged; a kind of erotic shadow play that added to the drama and flaunted their lack of Anglo Saxon body shame, which would have been much, no doubt, to Partch's delight.

John Jeserun's video of nature shots (web, moon, bamboo, smoke...) was cleverly projected onto the ceiling of the auditorium. This had the effect of extending the lighting across the proscenium arch and into the audience's airspace. At times, it acted like a multi-media chorus, extending the metaphor of the stage action. The Exordium, for instance, the spinning of a web, featured a web pattern on the ceiling. Or when the hobo lights a small fire to cook his meal, the smoke through the trees is projected overhead. An elegant and appropriate touch that extended Partch's own passion for multi-media.

The main protagonists, like the rest of the cast, were young and multi-racial. In itself, such casting is laudable; Partch was in fact a pioneer of racially blind casting (Odetta nearly played Jocasta in the 1952 *Oedipus*, for example). In this case, it clouded the already confusing relationships between the slayer, the ghost of the slain, and his son. Without benefit of dialog, if you hadn't read the program notes, you might think the story of Act I—instead of enacting the pilgrimage to Atsumori's grave, the appearance of his ghost, the re-enactment of his death, and an act of forgiveness—was simply a white guy wandering around, picking a fight with a black guy who is joined by an Asian tomboy all around the same age, and then they stop. It is critical that the audience knows what is going on in terms of plot for the whole gestalt to work, and at least this was abundantly clear in the 1969 production.

The standout performer of Act I was Mina Nishimura, who played the Son in search of his father's face. Her shoulders moved as though by a hidden force, and she acted as if in a trance possession.

The Japanese theme was stressed as a premise for presenting *Delusion* at the Japan Society. Curiously, this production strayed farther from Noh and Kabuki conventions than had the UCLA one, which featured more traditional stylized motions and heavy face make-up. Partch was interested in American equivalents to world traditions (*The Bewitched*, for example, portrays everyday urban scenes that he thought of as American Kabuki). This Japan Society production fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between being exclusively Japanese

or American. A clear decision one way or the other may have helped clarify the narrative and relationships of the first half. Because of the confusing characterization, the denouement was not as tragic as it needed to be. We are meant to be floored by the spiritual and emotional conflict of these family archetypes, so the resolution will be a cathartic relief and we can move on, having earned the right to the more naturalistic relief of Act II. In short, there was neither delusion nor fury.

SYNOPSIS

It is an olden time, but neither a precise time nor a precise place. The Exordium is an overture, an invocation, the beginning of a ritualistic web. Act 1, on the recurrent theme of Noh plays, is a music-theater portrayal of release from the wheel of life and death. In simplest terms it is a final enlightenment, a reconciliation with total departure from the area of mortal cravings and passions. It is based on the legend of a princely warrior who falls in battle at the hands of a young rival. The act begins with the slayer's remorseful pilgrimage to the scene, and to the shrine. The murdered man appears as a ghost, sees first the assassin, then his young son, born after his father's death, looking for a vision of his father's face. Spurred to resentment by his son's presence, he lives again through the ordeal of death, but at the end—with the supplication "Pray for me!"—he finds reconciliation.

There is nowhere, from the beginning of the Exordium to the end of Act II, a complete cessation of music. The Sanctus ties Acts I and II together; it is the Epilogue to the one, the Prologue to the other. Act II, based on an Ethiopian folk tale, involves a reconciliation with life, not as a separate mental act from that with death, but as a necessary concomitant, an accommodation toward a healthy—or at least a possible—existence. Its essence is a tongue-in-cheek understanding, attained through irony, even through farce. A young vagabond is cooking a meal over a fire in rocks when an old woman who tends a goat herd, approaches, searching for a lost kid. Later, she finds the kid, but—due to a misunderstanding caused by the hobo's deafness—a dispute ensues. Villagers gather and, during a violent dance, force the quarreling couple to appear before the justice of the peace, who is both deaf and near-sighted.

Following the justice's sentence, the Chorus sings in unison, "Oh, how did we ever get by without justice?" and a voice offstage reverts to the supplication at the end of Act I.

—Harry Partch

The other problem with the casting was the mismatch between the lead actors' youthful vocal ranges; while they negotiated the unconventional melodic lines with ease, none of them had the necessary power in their low registers to convey any *gravitas*. This weakness corresponded to the already lightweight choral singing from the musicians (the 1969 choral singing from the instrumentalists was comparatively butch). Partch spent a lifetime setting music to underpin words, retaining and enhancing their natural inflections and intelligibility. When he went beyond words, though, he did so for a purpose; using vocables to convey specific meanings, like some pre-verbal ancient message. He had transcribed Native American music from cylinder recordings in the 1930s and had been told that "the syllables meant something once but no-one knows exactly what any more." Similarly, in the 1950s he was inspired by hearing the voice of Helen Keller, which was expressive even when the literal meaning was incomprehensible. Partch's "nonsense syllables" then must be uttered as if they really meant something.

Seeing syllables written in the score next to a fixed pitch presents the singer with the challenge of how to bring them to life convincingly (without resorting to wobbly opera clichés). At best, there is an animalistic sliding, guttural cry, as much personality as technique: a fantasy mixture of Tom Waits, Chaliapin, Odetta, Paul Robeson, Meredith Monk, Diamanda Galas, and Mei Lan Fang. Vocal maturity is one area where the UCLA recording is superior; the voices are rich and focused (though they cheated in that performance by having trained singers in the pit and the actors miming their words; they too, as it turned out, couldn't find actors who could sing and act equally well.).

Partch lived at a time when cross-disciplinary performers were exotic and rare. The few models for such integrated abilities were typically from Asia or Africa, and few of those performers made it to U.S. shores. Partch's experience was largely the result of attending San Francisco's Mandarin Theater in the 1920s. We have now had many years' more exposure to examples of hybrid arts from overseas and locally; performing academies teach multiple skills; Broadway shows, Stomp, and Cirque de Soleil all require such abilities. So why is it so hard to find such talent for Partch works? Is it just the cost and infrequent nature of the productions? Will we ever see Partch's work routinely performed as intended or will it always be an uphill battle to find suitable vision and talent? Is that the price of being so original and demanding in every aspect of his art, that makes the challenge of producing a Partch work successfully, insurmountable? Though they were few and far between, such productions have taken place, so we wait for such a combination of talent and circumstances to manifest itself again.

Charting an appropriate course for the movement vocabulary is tricky in Partch's works; choreographers are typically afraid to be as literal and potentially hokey as he demands; they usually fall back on abstract modern

dance clichés. Partch, after all, had been an accompanist for silent movies as a teenager and was very familiar with the exaggerated gestural, miming style used in that medium to tell a story. If this production had gone further in that direction it might have clarified the motivations and relationships of Act I more convincingly.



The Sanctus, the compelling instrumental entr'acte, brought out the most spirited music-making of the evening. Even the shattering of one of the Pyrex carboys that make up the Spoils of War—a result of enthusiastic beating or Partch's closing-night message from beyond the grave—failed to dampen the energy (and also, thankfully, to cut any of the dancers' feet).

Because of less abstract production concepts, Act II was largely more successful in dramatic terms than the first; its humor is the counterpoint to Act I's tragedy and shows Partch's potential for biting satire. This was also where the vocal ejaculations of the chorus, the mimetic action to music, and the main characters played off each other most successfully.

A young vagabond is seen cooking a meal outside (he was the slayer in Act I). In appearance, he looked like a scruffy Gen X-er who just lost his job as coffee barista and is temporarily homeless. This seems an entirely fitting update of the hobo archetype: Partch, too, had been a homeless wanderer in the 1930s. An old goat woman appears looking for her lost kid. She seemed about the same age but with an extravagant club-kid hairdo, and she seemed to be hitting on the young man more than seeking her lost goat, but hey, the kid is a Lambchop hand puppet and plenty cute. The woman keeps bugging the young guy, who announces to the world (notably absent in the first recording), "I just want to be a hobo. Why doesn't she just go away?"

Partch doesn't miss a dig at the Establishment: the quarrel ends up in court where a deaf-blind judge assumes they are a hetero couple and the goat is their charming child. "Oh, how did we ever get by without justice?" Indeed. The fury of Act I has morphed into sarcasm by Act II. This is followed by a Zeussian

Nietzsche and Partch

Partch described himself as “a philosophic music-man seduced into carpentry.” Nietzsche might be called “a musical philosopher-man seduced into madness.” Despite their cultural differences they share a few traits in common (and not just the symptoms of syphilis that made their behavior seem occasionally erratic). The Apollonian and Dionysian theme recurs in both cases: Partch’s *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* is a contemporary commentary on the *Bacchae* of Euripides, with plenty of Dionysian action. Partch’s film *Windsong* tells of the attempted rape and transformation of Daphne and Apollo. And *Delusion*’s two-part form exhibits both principles, too. As an unrepressed gay man operating far from conservative mores of his day, Partch—like D.H. Lawrence—railed against prudish attitudes of Puritan body shame and advocated for more liberated instincts (such as those found in ancient Greece) wherever possible.

Both Partch and Nietzsche reviled the herd-mentality (what Partch called “termite psychology”) and created their individual works notwithstanding public incomprehension and ridicule. Each also expressed his ideas in idiosyncratic, passionate language that made academics scratch their heads and all too often dismiss the messages.

Partch’s parents had been missionaries in China prior to the Boxer Rebellion. His father returned apostate, mother a believer in every new religious fad of the day. Partch scorned the whole idea of Christianity and satirized its mumbo-jumbo in several works (such as *Barstow* and *Revelation*). *Delusion of the Fury*, as ritual theater, is a sincere sacred space designed to reveal ancient magic and a holistic humanitarian spirituality. Nietzsche, too, sought to construct a new, more naturalistic morality.

Both men had a love-hate relationship with Richard Wagner; Partch admired the idea of the multi-disciplinary opera-theatre-Utopia at Bayreuth and the notion of bringing together all the art forms to tell a mythical story. He complained, however, that the kind of voice needed to carry over the sound of the huge orchestra destroyed all intelligibility, therefore all narrative. It was also diametrically opposed to the intimacy of one voice and a small ensemble he felt best conveyed his dramatic impulse, at least in his early works.

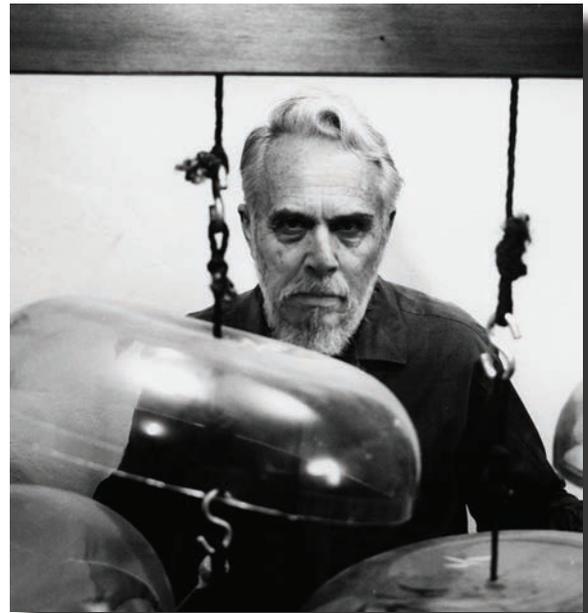
One way or another, both were composers, juggling and synthesizing ideas in novel ways. Nietzsche, like Partch (in *Bitter Music*), wrote monodramas to be spoken over piano accompaniment, and both wrote elaborate statements of faith: Nietzsche his *Miserere* and Partch his *Delusion of the Fury*.

thunderclap and the Chorus echoes the end of the first Act’s “Pray for me” chant. This time it is a general plea—an enlightened Coda moment—to be released from the worlds of regret, death, misunderstandings, do-gooders, idiots, and bureaucrats. Amen to that.

What was gained by seeing *Delusion* as a theatrical production after surviving so long as a sound recording? Some people were just as happy to close their eyes and listen to the music. Perhaps if the production had worked as planned, they couldn’t have taken their eyes away from the action on stage.

Apart from the fatal and telling flaws of a few, the production had much to commend it. Partch's worth as a deeply serious creator of drama was never in doubt. And the Japan Society's gargantuan effort to demonstrate works that bridge Japanese and American cultures was amply rewarded. Now, if we can only see annual productions of Harry Partch's *Delusion of the Fury* and iron out the remaining production wrinkles, we can truly see what Partch's universe is all about and why his efforts are still relevant to us all.

Performance photographs are from a 1969 UCLA production
photos: Danlee Mitchell



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Interview with Katja Brunkhorst

by Angela C. Holzer

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 1, February 2008

**HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



**Interview
with
Katja Brunkhorst**

**Interview with Katja Brunkhorst
Conducted August 2007**

by Angela C. Holzer

Katja Brunkhorst was born in Germany but spent most of her academic life in London, England, where she specialized in European Languages, Literature and Thought.

She has dealt extensively with the cognitive value of art, especially poetry, addressing and bridging the divide between aesthetics, psychology, and philosophy that often inhibits scholarly research.

Her first book, *'Verwandt-Verwandelt' - Nietzsche's Presence in Rilke*, is exemplary of this continued effort by focusing on common themes in Friedrich Nietzsche's and Rainer Maria Rilke's poetic and philosophical oeuvres. It is based on the surprising and exhilarating discovery of two copies of *Also sprach Zarathustra* in the Rilke archive in Gernsbach, Germany. This discovery made it possible for the first time to base a study of Nietzsche and Rilke on textual evidence. Rilke—who had denied any Nietzschean influence—marked Zarathustra's words. Brunkhorst's study thus not only develops the story of these thematic influences but poses the theoretical question of influence and contributes to the discussion on the philosophical aspect of Rilke's poetry and the poetic quality of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Katja Brunkhorst was working on the electronic publication of Nietzsche's complete works for [HyperNietzsche](#) at the Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes (CNRS/ENS) in Paris, in the context of the European project [DISCOVERY](#). She also continues to play in a [rock band](#), study the marginal notes Lou Andreas-Salomé made in her copy of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and is involved in a large research project on Nietzsche and popular culture (a volume on Nietzsche Pop is in preparation together with Mattia Riccardi).

We were already engaged in the interview in August 2007—electronically—when we met in person at the conference of the *Nietzsche-Gesellschaft* in Naumburg and then, incidentally, both settled in Berlin and became neighbours in the quarter of Prenzlauer Berg. The [Naumburg conference](#) turned out to be extraordinarily inspiring. We both are now busy elaborating themes that turned up in conference discussions. Katja founded [ApoDio](#), which will be the driving force behind a series of concert-conference events, the first one to take place in Berlin on September 12-14, 2008. Our group, consisting of two young and extraordinarily interesting Nietzsche scholars, [Enrico Müller](#) and [Friederike Günther](#), and me, is preparing another conference, also in Berlin, on September 26-28, 2008, in order to confront the affinities and discrepancies between the sociologist Norbert Elias and Nietzsche.

Katja has been amazingly active and vibrant, engaged and engaging, and full of ideas, with which the interview reverberates. On March 28, 2008, she will be in New York City to participate in the Nietzsche Circle's first event of the season at NYU's Deutsches Haus, to discuss Nietzsche and Rilke.

AH: *Your dissertation on Nietzsche and Rilke, ‘Verwandt-Verwandelt.’ Nietzsche’s Presence in Rilke, is a study of possible influences and common themes in the work of both. You base your analysis on two copies of Zarathustra that, although partly torn, were found by Hella Sieber-Rilke and you in Rilke’s estate. They are marked and underlined and thus give credible evidence to Rilke’s knowledge and interest in this book. How did you make this exciting discovery and when did you first engage with this thematic complex?*

KB: First of all, thank you, Angela, for agreeing to read my book. Early on, I came to both Nietzsche and Rilke through the gut rather than the brain, if you will. Both got to me immediately on first contact, above all through the mastery and musicality of their style. Then, it was their sheer fervor for art, and life itself: each seemed to be on fire to me, constantly echoing each other’s uncompromising love of the earthly and enquiring deeply into their selves, at any cost. Instinctively, they had always struck me as very much kindred spirits, despite their seeming discrepancies—which to me seem largely only to be perceived by superficial readers of their texts.

When studying both more closely, I soon felt their relatedness to be much deeper than just a more or less accidental, joint tapping of the *Zeitgeist* of their epoch. Even though that word is not well-liked, indeed almost a taboo, in what is still rather poststructuralist-dominated literary criticism (which has us believe there are no authors who write texts, that “empiric evidence” does not matter, and that there are no truths), there had to have been a more or less *direct* influence of Nietzsche on Rilke. The latter, of course, had always denied such an influence, as had Freud due to priority issues, but still, I began searching. Finding very little of value in existing secondary sources (with the majority of critics merely echoing Rilke’s self-stylization), and nothing of adequate depth or even book length, I decided to go back to the horse’s mouth, or at least the closest I could get: I turned to Hella Sieber-Rilke. I am fortunate enough to have met her and her husband (and Rilke’s grandson), Christoph, through Irina Frowen, herself one of the most knowledgeable readers of both Nietzsche and Rilke. Hella has been managing the Rilke archive near Baden-Baden in Southwestern Germany for a long time and knows his reading and writing like no other. At first, she answered my inquiry as to any Nietzsche books in Rilke’s possession in the negative. She, too, said she didn’t believe he had been very interested in Nietzsche, let alone read him. Stubbornly, however, I persisted and soon had an excited phone call which prompted

me to return to the Gernsbach archive as soon as I could. And indeed, there were two *Zarathustra* copies, one of them in fragments, but both complete with handwritten notes and other reading traces. Even Hella Sieber-Rilke had all but forgotten about them and found them tucked away at the bottom of a chest. As she is a great admirer of Nietzsche herself, you can imagine our excitement that day as we immediately set to work attempting to decipher the faint pencil traces! I really cannot thank her, Christoph, and Irina often enough for their hospitality, help, and friendship.

AH: *It was a pleasure to read your book. Not only were you thus able to provide evidence for Rilke's engagement with, at least parts of, Zarathustra, by analyzing the themes that you claim might be inspired by Nietzsche, you also argue, against a number of previous studies, that the Nietzschean influence on Rilke was continuous, which Rilke himself would probably have denied. Can you summarize briefly the arguments for this view?*

KB: The key lies both in the concept of total affirmation of our earthly life as well as in the continuity of the Rilkean *œuvre* in general. Scholarship tends to divide it into three phases, which can of course at times be handy or even necessary for the critic's work, but it does no justice, as Görner has observed, to the complex processes of poetic creation, nor does it, as I have found, take into account Rilke's own, very explicit view. In a 1925 letter to his Polish translator, he testifies to the continuity of his *œuvre* a year before his death in what reads like his poetological testament: he does not seem to see a major break between the essential conditions created in the *Stunden-Buch* and the *Neue Gedichte* and the praise of totality thus achieved in the late phase; rather, he sees the *Elegien* as a mere 'weitere Ausgestaltung,' a *continuing* development, of those preconditions. Thereby, in a manner highly evocative of Nietzsche's definition of 'the thought of the eternal return, that highest form of *affirmation*,' as the 'basic concept' of *Zarathustra* [KSA 6, 335], Rilke himself attests the quality of 'final *affirmation*'—along with the rejection of a split between the here and the beyond—not only to his mature work, but to his work as a whole.

AH: *The book is divided into three parts. First you analyze the existing scholarship on the nexus between Rilke and Nietzsche. There is surprisingly little, and a lot of redundancy, which might partly be due to the fact that Rilke denied any influence by Nietzsche. Yet, obviously he wrote the "Marginalien zu Nietzsche" and was a friend of Lou Salomé, which, however, brings up other problems with regard to his relationship to Nietzsche. Second, you turn to available evidence on his knowledge of Nietzsche and you compare the biographical circumstances of Nietzsche's writing Zarathustra and Rilke's reading it. Finally, you analyze the marked passages in the Zarathustra copy and isolate themes that were of interest to Rilke. The central methodological problem that you had to confront, as I see it, is the stringent characterization of*

'influence,' since you can neither solely rely on biographical or psychological affinities or rejections, nor on direct quotations. Could you describe the basis on which you confront this problem, the method that you call "reader-response-poetics"? Also, it seems that you are not drawing extensively on poststructuralist textual theory, e.g., Kristeva or Gérard Genette, to legitimize your approach. Is there a specific reason for this?

KB: You are quite right, the problem of "influence" detained me far too long as it is a highly contested field within literary studies, as I had to experience. It seems a most personal matter to many scholars: I was amused during my viva when my examiners said they were impressed with the textual interpretation of the findings but suggested I could have done without nearly the entire methodology chapter. That chapter, however, was what my internal examiners at the pre-viva, both of them poststructuralists, wanted me to focus on, to the exclusion of nearly everything else. Having considered Bloom, Barthes, Foucault, and Jauss already, they suggested Bakhtin, Baudrillard, and many others; but luckily, I did not heed their advice. The viva examiners probably would have let me fail if I had! So I hope this answers your question on what you perceive a comparative lack of poststructuralist theory: as far as I am concerned, there is too much of it already, at the expense of simply telling the story of Rilke's reading of Nietzsche. I would do that differently today. So I guess the matter of influence is one of the most subjective areas in our "*Geisteswissenschaft*" and it all depends on by whom one is—influenced.

As far as my "reader-response-poetics" are concerned, I simply read what the subjects of my study had to say on matters of influence and criticism—and heeded their voices. As I found to my surprise, that is something which cannot be taken for granted from some of those important names in the theory of influence: a key passage of Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, for example, is based on Bloom's own mistranslation of a paragraph from the second *Untimely Meditation*, in which he represents "Kritik" as "critic" rather than "criticism." Contrary to Bloom's construction, in that *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung*, Nietzsche really speaks with disdain about the ineffectivity of criticism, disapproving of its perceived lack of performativity.

Similarly, Rilke held that there is nothing by means of which one is less able to touch a work of art than critical words. He spoke of the delicately floating quality of the poetic image as untouchable by systematic interpretation, and that it was prone to imprint a different "edge of its precision" into each "understander." Interestingly, elsewhere he uses the same word, "Schwebe," also to describe Nietzsche's quality of floating lightness and warns of attempts at tying him down to meanings.

Therefore, his influence can be best described in musical terms, and has indeed been seen as a song of sentence-ideas by Roland Barthes, and as the

unfinished melody of his, Nietzsche's, looking by Oswald Spengler. Nietzsche, the music-making artist-metaphysician, of course, was aware of having created a most effective intellectual and poetic echo chamber in *Zarathustra*. What one needs to ask is where Rilke immersed himself into this chamber and how he produced echoes in his own work. Certain Zarathustrian motifs indeed resound more or less directly in the poet's writings, whilst others have undergone a poetic transformation.

AH: *The third part of the book is the substantial analysis of themes that influenced Rilke. The markings that you have to rely on, however, are few. There are, if this is correct, 15 meaningful marks in Salomé's copy and merely eight underlined or otherwise marked passages in Rilke's copy, of which not all point to an engagement by Rilke (e.g., the drawing inserted into the Vorreden, which is probably by Clara Westhoff, or the photograph of Paula Modersohn-Becker in the chapter "Von der Nächstenliebe," or the pressed cyclamen). How sure can we be that the pencil underlinings stem from Rilke himself?*

KB: Fairly sure; according to Hella Sieber-Rilke, they are typical of him in their tidy execution—Clara, in contrast, "did everything on a whim" and apparently, that showed.

AH: *And what, again, do we do with the manner in which he might have taken up but certainly transformed Nietzschean themes? The themes that you identify are emotional ones. Thus, in comparing Nietzsche's chapters "Von der Nächstenliebe" and "Von Kind und Ehe" with Rilke's "Requiem," Duineser Elegien, and Sonette an Orpheus, you conclude that both work toward redefining or re-evaluating the notion of love. You also see the theme of loneliness dominant in both. At times, it seems to me, the psychologization of Nietzsche is very direct, e.g., when you write on the Übermensch, which you consider a frightful spectre out of reach, engendered by unfulfilled love: "Herein, the impossibility of ever achieving the elusive goal of turning into the perfection that is the Übermensch is demonstrated vividly. All this suggests that Nietzsche actually despised himself for his imperfection, manifested most clearly by the Salomé/Rée episode" (90). You state that Nietzsche became an Übermensch, a type of inhuman and isolated "Gespenst" after his descent into insanity, which is a "price for his dangerous submission ... of the free and unbounded divine" (93). You state that his thinking and his isolation resulted in this mental decline.*

I am also sometimes surprised by your application of Rilkean utterings to describe Nietzsche's situation (93), or by your recurrence to Nietzsche's own ideas at argumentative cross-roads. Does your biographical approach allow for a clean separation of work and life, or would you consider this separation invalid? And, aside, did Nietzsche really die of brain cancer (93)?

KB: To answer your last question first, while the precise nature of his insanity

is of course still debated and probably will remain so, I would maintain that, whatever the medical reason, Nietzsche's excessive 'Denken am Abgrund,' along with his human isolation, cannot have furthered his mental health. By convincingly reassessing Nietzsche's symptoms, however, the latest research shows that the organic part of the cause of his decline was not, as customarily assumed, syphilis; but that the philosopher almost certainly died of brain cancer.

Secondly, there cannot ever be a 'clean separation' of life and work. I believe the bad reputation biographical elements encounter when it comes to methodological choices needs to be re-thought still. After deconstructivism, we not only can but must dare to engage with the personal history behind the work again, which is, as Montinari has observed, following Nietzsche himself, inextricably linked to it, anyway. I am not saying that is all there is to a Nietzschean text, but it is part of it, and a very important one! That is what I realized when I studied the circumstances of the conception and the birth of *Zarathustra*. Importantly, as I state in my methodology chapter, all this of course implies a redefinition of the term 'the author,' as it is often misleadingly believed to be a monolithic concept when, in fact, it is a composition of many voices and many selves. A composite, then, but nonetheless with delimiting boundaries.

As for the 'direct psychologization' of Nietzsche: indeed, the trinity of Nietzsche, Zarathustra, and the *Übermensch* is not always an easy one to split up into its constituent parts. My choice of this word from Christian theology is not accidental, for *Zarathustra* is of course not purely to be seen from a biographical angle, but also, among various other things, as the attempt at a 'philosophically religious and morally prophetic substitute for religion and morals,' as his friend Ida Overbeck put it. Nietzsche apparently heeded his own advice of 'unablässige *Verwandlung*,' 'incessant *transformation*' (KSA 9, 519), and forced himself through many different personae in a short space of time in order to get closer to that ever elusive goal of throwing off all his ballast and becoming the ideal version of himself.

Lastly, I have been reading Nietzsche on a daily basis for a living for a year now and never cease to be amazed at how much he saw himself as a psychologist, prefigured Freud, and regarded a philosopher's work as his 'stammered memoirs.' Only yesterday I came across this amazing statement in the 1883 fragments:

But this innocence also exists in the great philosophers: they are not conscious of the fact **that they are talking about themselves**—they are convinced it is "about the truth"—but basically, it is all about themselves.

AH: *Do you consider the relationship between Nietzsche's published writings, his notebooks, letters, and his personal psychology as transparent as it partly*

appears in your book? Do you draw on these sources without making a distinction of status? After all, there is the discussion, initiated among others by Werner Stegmaier, on the relationship between and the handling of private and published works by Nietzsche.

KB: Firstly, I never draw on a source without making a distinction of status. However, that status is in itself a matter in need of investigation. Letters in particular are strange hybrids of poetological statements, records of life, and works of art. They are neither always unadulterated testimony to a writer's experience, as some if not all are certainly written with the possibility of publication in mind (in his will, Rilke '[envisages] their publication [...] as works of art in themselves'), nor can they automatically be included in his literary work, as some surely do not transcend and transform the personal enough to be quite that.

At HyperNietzsche, we make visible the web of connections of different stages of a thought. You can follow genetic paths from drafts to notebooks to manuscripts to the printed text. The web is of course the ideal place to do this and will probably change the way we look at the canon of texts in the future.

AH: *I was struck by two major choices in your book. First, you focus on emotional themes and on the possibility of the cognizance of emotions in Nietzsche's and Rilke's works, which is, as you explained, preconditioned by Rilke's reading of Nietzsche. Frequently, you resort to biographical or psychological information in order to clarify the correlation of the works and the personal situations of Nietzsche and Rilke. In both cases you draw attention to their existential loneliness in later years and their inability to love. I really applaud and admire your recourse to other sources, e.g., Otto Modersohn's diary, to elucidate the biographical background and the problematic—selfish—behavior that Nietzsche might have inspired in amorous contexts. Also, Lou Andreas-Salomé, her elusiveness for both and their glorification of her play a crucial role here. She also functions as an intellectual relay between Nietzsche and Rilke and as inspiration for both. In fact, you even argue that her absence ultimately inspired creativity. Secondly, you also, subtly and rarely, refer to feminist theory and the 'object' role that Salome was often ascribed to in scholarship. This is also expressed in the tendency to jovially refer to her as 'Lou,' which you consciously avoid. How else do you think your study avoids that 'objectification' of Salome? She mainly appears as muse or as mirror.*

KB: My book started out as project on Freud and Salomé as well as Rilke and Nietzsche, and I soon realized maybe that would be a good idea if I had 50 rather than five years to write it! Hence, the focus needed to be narrowed and I decided to concentrate solely on the Nietzsche/Rilke nexus—for now. Therefore, Salomé can necessarily merely feature in her mediating role between the two here. There are plans, however, to dedicate a future project

entirely to her writing, which in turn is inextricably linked to the way she read Nietzsche—as evident in her working copy of *Zarathustra* I found which remains unevaluated as of yet—mirroring the brief but utterly intense dialogue they were engaged in in life. For, as much as she was muse and mirror to Nietzsche, he was to her! They were “sister brains” *to each other*, after all.

AH: *This leads me to another question. What role, do you think, does or should Feminism play in an engagement with Nietzsche today? Would you argue that ‘women,’ if that category can be used here for heuristic purposes, have read or should read Nietzsche differently? Do you think there is a striking imbalance in Nietzsche scholarship? Have you ever seen it as male dominated?*

KB: I am not an expert in Feminist theory. Nor do I, in fact, believe in a category “women.” Again, the poststructuralist Nietzsche interpreters (especially Derrida in *Spurs*, as Carol Diethe has pointed out in her book on Nietzsche and women, *Beyond the Whip*) and their casting of “woman” into the restraining yet hollow corset of a pure metaphor have merely hardened patriarchal perspectives. To me, Nietzsche still is not recognized enough as and for doing away with -isms and stereotypes of all sorts. Of course there are bitter and, indeed, misogynist remarks about women in his texts and I do not wish to apologize them away, but they have to be read in context-like everything in Nietzsche.

This brings me back to my defense of biographical information: many of those remarks may be understood much better knowing what he experienced in his personal life at the time. And most can probably be deduced back to the unpleasant personalities of the “Naumburg virtue”: his mother and sister, who were to him the only objection against his concept of the eternal return. On the other hand, there are his numerous deep friendships with women such as Malwida von Meysenbug, for whom he had the greatest respect and admiration. Not to mention Salomé, whom he called the most intelligent human being he ever met—that is, before she turned him down as a lover, which sadly marks the start point of his bitter onslaught on “women,” including the infamous whip statement in *Zarathustra*, which can be traced back to a photograph Nietzsche himself had staged, showing Salomé brandishing a makeshift whip over him and Paul Rée.

As to your suggestion of an imbalance in Nietzsche scholarship: I would agree, and add that it simply mirrors the general situation in our society, which remains male dominated still.

AH: *A striking situation considering the fact that more female than male students take up a humanities curriculum at German and British universities. With regard to Nietzsche, he certainly also objected to the ‘idealist’ Meysenbug, and at times he displayed an extraordinary attachment to both*

mother and sister. Another point that I would now like to bring up, however, is your interpretation of Nietzsche's poems, especially 'Einsiedlers Sehnsucht.' Nietzsche's poems, it seems, are today largely absent in engagements with his work. What status do you accord to them?

KB: While it is true that Nietzsche objected to the idealist Meysenbug, as Rainer Hanshe reminded me, he also was in awe of her and her book and wrote a fascinating letter to her about it on 14 April 1876. An example:

“

You walked before me as a higher self, as a *much* higher self—but encouraging me rather than shaming me; thus you soared in my imagination, and I measured my life against your example and asked myself about the many qualities I lack. I thank you for so much more than a book.

Concerning the absence of Nietzsche's poems from engagements with his work, I very much agree with your observation, and find it deplorable that what was very much part of his work to Nietzsche is virtually ignored by his interpreters. The problem seems to be that of a hierarchy of discourses, with thought still thought to represent truth, and literature, and especially poetry, “just” beauty or emotion. At any rate, poetry is regarded as philosophy's little discourse sister. The tendency towards blinkered compartmentalization within the academy I spoke about answering an earlier question worsens those issues. There needs to be more work on the cognitive value of art; especially in the case of Nietzsche. As Rilke puts it in the wonderful fourteenth chapter of his only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*:

“

Alas, but writing verse amounts to so little if one does it too early. One ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness for an entire lifetime, and possibly a long one, and then, at the very end, maybe one could write ten good lines. For verse is not, as people believe, emotion (that, one has early enough in life),—it is experience.

AH: *Will the book be available in both English and German?*

KB: It is based on my PhD dissertation, which I wrote in English, as that is usually required at a British university. I quoted from the original German, however, as I was able to work more accurately in that manner, given the lyrical quality of much of Nietzsche's writing—not to mention Rilke's, of course.

Still, I regret not having gone with other publishers' offers at times—as they would have required me to translate all of the book into English (or German, respectively), it probably would have reached a much wider audience. As time was of the essence, however, I signed with Iudicium, who were happy to include the bilingual book in Erich Kleinschmidt's CURSUS series. An entirely monolingual and possibly partly re-written edition is something I would love to do at some point; not least because I find my style too dry and stilted in places and the description of methodology, etc., excessive. I would focus on matters of interpretation much more now given a chance. There is so much material I have not yet been able to evaluate adequately. Sadly, just at the moment such plans will have to remain dreams due to an acute lack of both time and money. I am still struggling to pay my publisher for *Verwandt-Verwandelt* and I think it is an unfortunate situation to be in for us budding writers, and quite telling of the society we live in, to have to shoulder the printing cost for dissertations solely by ourselves, even for books that sell well (as, luckily, does mine).

AH: *You studied, for the most part, in London. Were you born in Germany and will you continue your work in both countries or do you have a preference? I am asking also in conjunction with the question regarding the situation of Nietzsche studies in both countries. Do you recognize a perceptible difference with regard to diverging interests in Nietzsche in both countries and their academic and institutional Nietzsche-Forschung?*

KB: Yes, I am German born and bred but lived in London for a decade. I studied as well as taught at universities in both countries and have indeed noticed considerable differences. At the University of London I was lucky enough to encounter an intangible possibility of truly original thinking in the air. Students were being encouraged to transgress boundaries, both disciplinary and hierarchical, and genuinely develop their own opinions. Above all, they were not afraid to express them, rather than just rattle off thoughtlessly whatever they could copy from their professors. By comparison, in a *Germanistik* seminar in Germany, for example, one hardly understands a single word that is being said for all the jargon. Also, structures are still more rigid, and one is compartmentalized according to strict subject divides. I am not sure it would be possible to attend classes on Freud in an English department here! Moreover, speaking as someone who studied first English and German, then European literature and thought, to go on to write a thesis on a German philosopher and a poet in English, it confuses people. Neither the *Germanisten* nor the *Anglisten*, or, of course, the “philosophers,” tend to accept one as one of them. In England, things are somewhat freer than that, at least in my experience. One thing comes to mind already, however, which is tipping the scales for Germany again: Nietzsche scholars can usually read the original texts. I just find it amazing how many self-proclaimed “experts” out there cannot even do that! Just now I am thinking of the Bloomian “misunderstanding” of Nietzsche I spoke of earlier, on which he based an

entire, and very influential, book. At least at a German university, if you study English, you are required to understand, speak, and write the language in class. Although that has been slipping lately, now that German universities are becoming self-marketed companies too who need to focus on their turnover.

AH: *Where lie, according to you, interesting aspects of a contemporary or future engagement with Nietzsche's work?*

KB: I would spontaneously argue for taking Nietzsche more seriously, and that can mean to be allowed to laugh with him again, for example: "And may each truth be false to us which didn't involve laughter!" ("Und falsch heisse uns jede Wahrheit, bei der es nicht Ein Gelächter gab!") In general, he can help with the much-needed rehabilitation of the emotions within a science-dominated academic discourse. Mostly, however, for letting his writing be what he intended: dynamite. Something which has an actual, immediate *effect* on those who read it critically and attentively, and which has the power to help bridge the huge gap we have, in this country at least, between our "high" and "low" cultures. (On a side note, I have even founded a literary society akin to the Nietzsche Circle to that end which will be online very soon at www.apodio.de.)

That, however, would entail the death of the critic (as described in the second *Untimely Meditation*) and the re-birth of the author, the *human being*, behind any given text. The philologists have had their way with Nietzsche to the point of fragmenting him to death, as have the philosophical interpreters—especially those coming from his postmodern appropriation by Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault. Mostly, those discourses have very much remained incestuously within the ivory towers. Let people re-appropriate their own Nietzsches, with the focus on the richly performative, artistic and literary qualities of his texts, and above all: let the focus be on *Nietzsche* more. Maybe especially on those of his writings that have been most neglected so far, for their refusal to be categorized or compartmentalized: *Zarathustra*, today clearly a book for no-one, out of scholarly fashion, is an obvious choice—as is *The Gay Science*, which is so vibrantly hopeful and possibly shows Nietzsche at his sanest.

AH: *What are you currently working on?*

KB: OK, here comes a generous helping of URLs with a side dish of shameless self-promotion! I have been a postdoc for the ITEM (CNRS/ENS, Paris), working on the Discovery project (www.discovery-project.eu/), as well as HyperNietzsche.org, for the past year. At HyperNietzsche, I worked on an electronic edition of Nietzsche's works, which is an important project as it will be the first truly complete Nietzsche edition ever—we are co-operating with the Klassik-Stiftung Weimar on it. Currently, I am searching for a teaching and research job, as I have realised I need to be working alongside other people. Too much of the *vita contemplativa* is not for me!

That is also why my “leisure time” is devoted to making music with my band, and to my research, which I pursue with a group of friends. Right now, it focuses on Nietzsche and popular culture with a series of talks and events at Naumburg, Weimar, and a big concert/conference in Berlin to take place from 12-14 September 2008. Planning is under way and the call for papers, songs, and pictures is available in English and German on www.nietzschepop.org—a website still very much work in progress. The organization behind it is ApoDio, which generally encourages the cross-fertilization of “high” and “sub” cultures and will stage a similar event each year from now on.

Meanwhile, my mid- to long-term goal is still that book about Salomé, if not (that really would be a dream come true!) a long-overdue critical edition of her works. I’ll probably get round to that by the time I’m 80! Before that, though, I will come to New York City in late March to answer any remaining questions in person. I am much looking forward to that and hope the Nietzsche Circle won’t regret their invitation!

AH: *Good luck with your future undertakings, and thank you for this rich and engaging interview!*

a review of

Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art

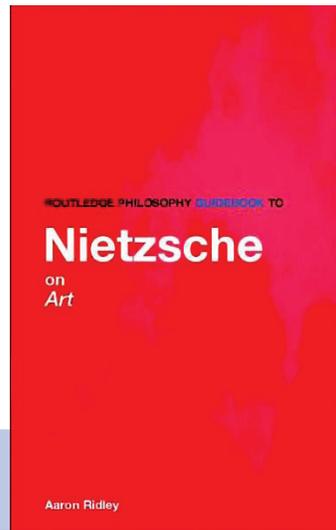
by Benjamin Moritz

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 1, February 2008

HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

Routledge Philosophy
Guidebook to

a review of



Nietzsche on Art

Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art
Aaron Ridley
Routledge 2007

by Benjamin Moritz

A philosophy professor of mine once alluded to “the undifferentiated mass of pure personality” that characterized the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. My professor had intended his description to be derogatory, yet many Nietzsche-philes (myself included) embrace this unique quality of Nietzsche’s writings as a refreshing change from the philosophical status quo and as a style uniquely suited to Nietzsche’s philosophical project. Aaron Ridley obviously understands and respects this aspect of Nietzsche’s writings and endeavors to examine Nietzsche’s views on art without losing sight of the inherently dynamic and holistic nature of Nietzsche’s philosophical output. Nietzsche consistently addresses processes over specific results; specifically the methods of critique that allow individuals to see themselves and their surroundings in new ways. Given the variety of starting points and case studies Nietzsche provides in his writings, Ridley here provides a view of this critical process from the perspective of Nietzsche’s writings on art. As Ridley explains:

¹ Aaron Ridley, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 2.



Any worthwhile attempt at a reconstruction of his “philosophy of art” must be both developmental and contextual - that it must, in effect, be an attempt to understand Nietzsche’s intellectual biography through the prism of art.¹

When compiling a “guidebook” or other explicitly introductory secondary text on Nietzsche’s work, it is tempting to systematize or dilute Nietzsche’s thinking to present the reader the “gist” of his ideas. Authors who succumb to this temptation either ignore vast tracts of Nietzsche’s output or find themselves avoiding the wonderful paradoxes, changes of perspective, and rhetorical flourish that both characterize Nietzsche’s work, and make possible his delicate yet devastating critiques of culture, philosophy, art and religion. In *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art* Aaron Ridley has, for the most part, pulled off the difficult task of summing up Nietzsche’s views on art without simplifying or falsifying the intricate texts he investigates. Ridley accomplishes this by acknowledging the “undifferentiated mass” that is Nietzsche’s thought, and consistently maintaining a perspective that considers and accepts Nietzsche’s own process of self-critique. Within such a perspective, the inevitable contradictions become the product of a thinker constantly striving to reevaluate his own views as he urges his readers to do likewise.

² See esp. Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumour after Hegel*, or the works of Barnett Newman for more on this.

³ Ridley, 1.

⁴ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I, On Reading and Writing.

⁵ Not to be confused with “evolution.” Ridley is consistent in his avoidance of teleological language.

Many Nietzsche scholars have alluded to the fact that his writings are simultaneously *about art and artworks themselves*.² It is but one instance of a complexity of context that results from a layering of critique with that which is critiqued, and which then provides Nietzsche the leverage of integrity necessary to launch his notoriously effective assaults on his chosen target. There is a profound hypocrisy involved in utilizing the context and meaning granted to us by our received culture and beliefs, to critique and tear down that very culture and belief system—a hypocrisy that Nietzsche’s quasi-post-modern use of layered meanings and rhetoric to create widely varied and occasionally outright contradictory perspectives allows him to avoid. Ridley assents to this perspective from the outset when he describes Nietzsche’s philosophy of art as “multi-dimensional” and explains that, “the style and construction of all of his books is self-consciously artistic.”³

Ridley organizes his work chronologically, grouping Nietzsche’s writings together in accordance with their relative similarity in aesthetic perspective. Although this organizational schema can lead to an evolutionary perspective, Ridley avoids the error of teleology that others have made—a sort of *post hoc* fallacy wherein the earlier books must be laying the groundwork for the later, perfectly realized magnum opus. An excellent example can be found in Ridley’s treatment of Apollo and Dionysus, one of the best descriptions of this troublesome dichotomy I’ve encountered, and sufficient to classify Ridley’s book as a valuable addition to the literature in and of itself. Never implying a finished version of the concepts, Ridley revisits the Apollonian and Dionysian concepts throughout the book within the contexts of *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Gay Science*. He teases out an important distinction between the psychological and metaphysical aspects of Dionysianism that Nietzsche (possibly unwittingly) inherits from the Schopenhauerian context that colors his early writings. By keeping in mind the differences that stem from applying Dionysianism to these two categories, the apparent contradictions between the Dionysianism of *The Birth of Tragedy* and that of *Twilight of the Idols* can be recontextualized as a new view from a different perspective. Nietzsche famously asserts that the shortest way is often from peak to peak, and by acknowledging several of these mountain-top perspectives within his account of the Dionysian, Ridley—in this instance—shows us his own “long legs.”⁴ This is not a philosophical sleight-of-hand by which Ridley explains away all contradiction, but a close reading of Nietzsche’s nuanced use of language which identifies a shift⁵ in rhetorical emphasis from the metaphysical to the psychological.

Importantly, Ridley does not ignore the problems contained within either category: the metaphysical oxymoron of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the Dionysianism of *The Gay Science* that is simultaneously anti-romantic and ultra-romantic. The latter conundrum is described—albeit problematically—through yet another dichotomy—that of *becoming* and *being*. Ridley describes

the two categories as follows:

⁶ Ridley, 125.

⁷ Ibid., 127.

⁸ Ibid., 124.

“ If the Dionysian art of *being* is construed, in other words, as the art of rounding things off so as to bring out what is exemplary in them, then there need be no necessary tension between an art of that sort and the “good will to appearance” (GS §107).⁶

“ The Dionysian art of ‘*becoming*’ . . . represents a travesty of the intellectual conscience . . . in giving absolute priority to ‘the artist’s point of view’, and so to his need to ‘discharge . . . strength’, the requirement of honesty has gone missing without trace.⁷

That there *could* be a tension between an artistic “rounding off” and the “good will to appearance” is a response to Nietzsche’s own attacks on what he describes as Romantic art. Ridley describes Romantic art’s bad intellectual conscience as a falsification of the world by

“ . . . Branding it with one individual’s ‘image, the image of his torture.’ The world is, in this much, potentially to be falsified *without regard* for its real nature, for the truth—since there may be all too much in any given person’s ‘suffering’ that is ‘singular,’ ‘narrow’ and idiosyncratic.”⁸

One might notice a seemingly out of place reference to “real nature,” and “truth,” and wonder how Ridley supports his use of these terms. In fact, upon close reading, Ridley does not provide adequate evidence to support his use of “truth” and “real nature”; the few Nietzschean citations that actually include these terms date back to *The Birth of Tragedy* or occasionally *The Gay Science*, while more contemporaneous writings (the passages relevant to his critique of Romanticism date from his later books) contain a striking lack of such terminology. Another question might be why does Ridley turn to these prejudicial terms to describe a distinction (between Romanticism and Dionysianism) for which Nietzsche himself provides ample explanation? The answer to this second question becomes apparent when examining Ridley’s harsh critique of the so-called “Dionysian art of *becoming*” and the “travesty of intellectual conscience” that it represents. His critique of this aspect of the Dionysian stems from a distinction first made by Julian Young, and from which

⁹ See TI: IX.24, X.5, IX.43.

¹⁰ Ridley, 126.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966): §5.

Ridley's terms "art of *being*" and "art of *becoming*" originate. Ridley, via Young, identifies several passages within *Twilight of the Idols*⁹ that hearken back to the descriptions of Dionysian man found in *The Birth of Tragedy* in which one



escapes becoming by transforming oneself, by becoming 'oneself the eternal joy of becoming.' Dionysian man, in other words, identifies himself with the whole eternal process of becoming and, as such, achieves immunity to the penalties of being *part* of that flux.¹⁰

In short, Ridley distinguishes two different and mutually incompatible versions of the Dionysian within *Twilight of the Idols*, one which focuses on being, and one which avoids the pain and suffering of the present by fleeing to the eternal becoming. Ridley's earlier allusions to "truth" and "real nature" have, therefore, set the stage for a demand for accountability to the present. Again, it seems as though spiking his rhetoric with these terms is as unnecessary here as it was in his distinction between Romanticism and Dionysianism. Both *Twilight of the Idols* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* have numerous anecdotes and stern warnings about the evils of a Christian escapism and its cowardice in the face of the painful present, and none of these retreat to a metaphysical "truth" to establish their validity. Putting aside, for a moment, the misplaced use of "truth" as a justification, Ridley's attack on the Dionysian art of becoming has serious repercussions on all aspects of Nietzsche's later thought (hence the "undifferentiated mass") and constitutes the most controversial aspect of Ridley's book. Although Ridley's stated project limits him to a discussion of Nietzsche's views on art, the significant ramifications this critique has on the concept of the eternal recurrence (of which there is very little mention) would seem to require further discussion. The maintenance of a holistic and multi-perspectival view for which I earlier applauded Ridley here seems to fade away.

Ridley does, however, provide ample discussion of the complex relationship of art and nihilism within Nietzsche's thought. Throughout his writings Nietzsche looks to art as a tool with which the individual can ward off the horrors of nihilism, but the possible ways in which this tool should be used varies from book to book. Ridley acknowledges this variability and provides a close reading of Nietzsche's works, both early and late, to reveal how Nietzsche accumulated these perspectives. A lightning rod for this discussion is the famous quote from *The Birth of Tragedy*: "It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified."¹¹ That last phrase, "eternally justified" carries with it a problematic association with a metaphysical argument that Nietzsche's middle and later writings explicitly

reject. Justification assumes an alignment with some absolute that stands outside that which is being justified. Since we are discussing “existence and the world,” any justification seems to imply another realm from which existence and the world can be judged and measured; i.e., a metaphysical distinction between reality and existence. Ridley replaces this apparent disconnect between Nietzsche’s early aesthetic views (as characterized by *The Birth of Tragedy*) and his later works with a careful reading that presents a gradual evolution of ideas. Ridley sums up this evolution thus:

¹² Ridley, 80.



In *The Birth of Tragedy* it was “only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*: (BT 5); in *The Gay Science*, by contrast, it is only “As an aesthetic phenomenon” that “existence is still *bearable* for us” (GS 107). Eternal justification requires, at the very least, that what does the justifying be true, and in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche thought that he had a candidate for that. But in *The Gay Science* it is precisely the truth that is the problem, and so art, which is enlisted in order to falsify, in order to *evade* the truth, can no longer, even potentially, offer justifications of existence (eternal or otherwise). It can, at most, offer to make life liveable.¹²

While Ridley’s account of this evolution (or perspectival accumulation, to avoid the implication of an ultimate goal) is helpful, his superficial engagement with the issue of truth (again) can be seen as a weakness. The role of truth in Nietzsche’s writings has always been controversial and, as in his discussion of the Dionysian art of becoming, Ridley’s use of this delicate term is not always applied with adequate subtlety. Truth is a problem in *The Gay Science* and beyond, yet Ridley reuses the terminology in ways lacking the conceptual sophistication to which he alludes above. Despite this drawback, Ridley is still largely successful in presenting a clear and insightful presentation of Nietzsche’s views on art. The subtle (and sometimes not so subtle!) shifts in tone that are so characteristic of Nietzsche are given succinct and coherent treatment, and it is an important addition to the literature. The *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art*, despite its overly lengthy title, is a surprisingly slim volume, weighing in at just over 150 pages, plus invaluable endnotes (yet another argument, in my opinion, for footnotes). Within the relatively short book then, it is surprising to see such important distinctions that not only do not obscure Nietzsche’s nuanced thought, they actually provide new ways of understanding it. Ridley should also be applauded for his use of extensive quotations. The prodigious secondary literature on

Nietzsche's writings is rife with short, selective clippings used to support this or that supposition. Given Nietzsche's penchant for hyperbole, rhetoric and sarcasm, this is a dangerous path to tread, and I have often consulted the indicated passage only to see that the overall context points in an entirely different direction from the one the author has implied. Ridley's quotations are adequately thorough and clearly cited.

Although Ridley maintains a consistent goal throughout the book, his means of achieving it vary in a mildly distracting manner. The majority of the book interacts directly with Nietzsche's own texts, but on occasion Ridley engages with secondary authors, most notably Julian Young, the previously mentioned author of *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*. When this first occurs, in Chapter 2 on *Human, All Too Human*, it is somewhat jarring given the style and pace of the previous chapter. After Ridley examines and contradicts some of Young's interpretations, one might expect him to continue the pattern of textual analysis followed by digressions into secondary literature, but no such relationship emerges. Ridley's analyses of Young's works are valuable and well reasoned, but seem somewhat out-of-place in this introductory volume. Furthermore, although Ridley does take Young to task on several issues, his overall approach to Nietzsche is similar to Young's. Within the context of a guidebook, one would hope for a more balanced engagement with secondary sources than Ridley here provides.

The beauty, excitement, enthusiasm, and emotion that inhabit Nietzsche's writings are part and parcel with the philosophical arguments they surround, and cumulatively create that "undifferentiated mass" that so irritated my professor. For Nietzsche enthusiasts, that undifferentiated mass contains the power of Nietzsche's thought, and any attempt to strip away the style from the substance leaves the reader with neither. Aaron Ridley understands this aspect of Nietzsche's writing, and has written a guidebook that provides a clear and concise introduction to the nuances of Nietzsche's views on art. This book is hardly exhaustive, but Ridley here faces the challenge that confronts anyone writing an overview, guidebook or introduction: some things must be omitted in the service of succinctness and clarity. The aspects of Nietzsche's aesthetic views that Ridley *does* choose to address are effective, while his omissions (particularly in regard to the eternal recurrence and Nietzsche's more critical views towards art) are frustrating. The quality of the material that *is* present, however, outweighs the drawbacks resulting from that which is lacking.

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7 *Hyperion—review of Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art*

Stoic Nihilism

& The Beauty of Oblivion

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Happy Days

BAM, Brooklyn, New York

January 8 – February 2, 2008

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 1, February 2008

HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS



& the Beauty of Oblivion

A Meditation on Beckett's *Happy Days*

Happy Days

BAM, Brooklyn, NY

January 8 – February 2, 2008

by Rainer J. Hanshe

“ I have little talent for happiness.
—Samuel Beckett

“ If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can
ever warm me, I know that is poetry.
—Emily Dickinson

“ . . . weak characters that have no power over themselves . . .
hate the constraint of style. They feel that if this bitter and evil
constraint were imposed upon them they would be demeaned:
they become slaves as soon as they serve; they hate to serve.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

“ Remember too on every occasion which leads one to vexation
to apply this principle: not that this is a misfortune, but that to
bear it nobly is good fortune.
—Marcus Aurelius

From the extremity of his own limit, Cioran said that more than one of Beckett's pages seemed to him like “a sort of monologue after the end of some cosmic epoch.” What they generate he elaborated is the “sensation of entering into a posthumous universe, some geography dreamed by a demon released from everything, even his own malediction.” *Happy Days* could be described precisely in this manner, and Cioran may have had it in mind, but whatever survives after that end apparently continues *ad infinitum*. World without end, Winnie announces after her opening prayer. World without end. In the midst of the loss of all sense of irony, Cioran's vision of Beckett is the necessary antibiotic for curing those who suffer from the plague that is Winnie's happiness, a plague that is now at rule and that has infected New York. 'Tis one thing if Winnie be as blind to her predicament as she is ignorant of what she quotes, 'tis another if the sight of those observing her be occluded. What to say of who directs and who incarnates her? Have they all 'seen enough' not to be inconvenienced by their blindness? Or have they grown so inured to nihilism and demoniacal topography that they find 'wonderful' even an infernal event? Or is there a refusal to countenance the event altogether?

Whether Beckett was released from malediction as a writer is arguable, and while some of the long standing interpretations of his writing are certainly ossified clichés, the abyss is there. The nihilism is incontrovertible. The dark, as Winnie the unconscious ventriloquist echoes, is eternal. For Jesus Christ sake Amen. There is no end to the black night, even in the perpetually blinding and hellish light of *Happy Days*. As comic as he sometimes makes the abyss, it still like the bell for Winnie *gouges*. Aristophanes is comic, too, but his plays sting. Whilst Beckett's characters may provoke laughter, and whilst his plays may be humorous, the laughter let us not forget resounds in a posthumous universe where acquiring hope is as difficult as cultivating fruit from its obdurate terrain. Winnie may be optimistic, but optimism in and of itself is not positive; neither is it unequivocally admirable. "Was Epicurus" not "an optimist," Nietzsche asked, "precisely because he was *afflicted*?" Even Socrates was chided for his optimism—it is unworthy of a philosopher Nietzsche thought because it is naïve. In the world of *Happy Days*, little to nothing grows and aside from Winnie and Willie a lone emmet is the only visible form of life, but it is ready to birth a host of other emmets that will crawl over and possibly within Winnie's skin. That is scant cause for optimism. Fornication aside, the following decade it appears will be the decade of cheery, light-hearted, and, to our misfortune, *palatable* Beckett. The National Theatre of Great Britain's *Happy Days*, as directed by Deborah Warner and performed by Fiona Shaw, ushers in this regrettable vogue. What happened to the trouble with being born?

Warner's and Shaw's original intention was to stage a version of *Waiting for Godot* with women playing Didi and Gogo. After supposedly receiving a life sentence of exile from the Beckett Estate for their abuse of *Footfalls*, Warner and Shaw wanted to return not only with their impudence intact, but with even more irreverence. When still alive, Beckett consistently opposed attempts to stage *Godot* with women. To Estelle Parsons' and Shelley Winters' request, Beckett's answer was resolute: "definitely NO." Recently, the castle that is Beckett received a defeat. A new dawn it seems has broken in Italy, a precedent set, perhaps, for the world. With the Pontadera Theatre's victory over the Beckett Estate, which issued a cease and desist to the theater because their performance of *Godot* featured women in the central roles, Warner and Shaw perhaps thought victory would be quick to come. After the Ponatadera's triumph, one of few victories against the Beckett Estate, the theatre company's lawyer, Maurizio Fritelli, spoke of the decision as a victory for civil liberties. "The sentence," he said, "is valuable" for it "reiterates that men and women have equal rights." Linda Ben-Zvi argued in *Women in Beckett* that "to ignore the roles of women, or of men, is to fall prey to an acceptance of the very stereotypes and limits the work reveal." Is there not a gross confusion of categories here? Fritelli's statement is simply baffling, for the matter has nothing to do with equal rights. If a man wanted to play Winnie

or the unnamed woman and voice of *Rockaby*, Beckett surely would have refused, as is easily attestable his estate now would. Ben-Zvi is also royally perplexed. In refusing to permit the alteration of the gender of his characters, there is no approval of stereotypes and no acquiescence to limits. There can be no stereotypes in Beckett's plays for they do not even contain types. In his universe, types have been obliterated. What remains is something else entirely, something like a Giacometti sculpture. There is nothing more honed. What perchance is left is the wheat of humanity. Nothing more. It is a condensation of being.

If there are limits in Beckett's plays they are not limits in the ordinary sense; as Cioran realized, Beckett "reached the *limit*," that is, he reached an extreme threshold. He begins there in fact, "at the impossible, at the exceptional, at the impasse." It is "limit-situation as point of departure, the end as advent!" It is this Cioran explained "which accounts for the feeling that that world of his, though always tottering on the verge of death, may continue indefinitely, whereas ours will soon disappear." Cioran's use of the word advent is not arbitrary; Beckett's work is a movement towards a different kind of consciousness altogether. It is the arrival of something unprecedented. Death's dreadful advent is the mark of man, and Beckett chronicles that event poetically.



"I want," he said, "to bring poetry into drama, a poetry which has been through the void and makes a new start in a new room-space. I think in new dimensions and basically am not very worried about whether I can be followed."

Poetry of the void, stressed to a threshold. There are no other limits in Beckett's work. Ben-Zvi's viewpoint is the prototypical 'postmodern' one, which in the wildest manner struggles to engineer what is a question of artistic vision into one of ethics and rights. What is at stake actually has nothing to do with either, and Beckett's work will not suffer such politically correct tyranny. Or we should not permit it to. It is architecture that is in question; architecture and nothing less substantive. Changing the gender of a character is like changing the instrumentation of Stravinsky's *Rites of Spring*. No more would it be Stravinsky's composition. This is a matter of vision, of refusing to permit the gross deformation of an artwork. It is to respect structural design, for to alter that structure is to deform the entire building; if one intends on committing such atrocities, and that's what they are, one should simply create one's own work. Why abuse the masterpieces of others? What is spoken of as creative freedom is a masquerade for ineptitude. The guise is hollow; stuffed; filled with straw. Alas! Ireland is not Rome, nor is Britain, and the Beckett Estate, admirably, is not a donkey. It knows, as Zarathustra advised, how to say NO,

which is a rare event in this permissible epoch where ‘nothing is true.’ Warner and Shaw’s request was swiftly rejected, no struggle ensued, and in its stead, to the horror of both Warner and Shaw, the Beckett Estate suggested they perform *Happy Days*. Was this not a ‘punishment’ as brutish as Winnie’s? To others, rare is the honor of performing such a consummate work. Billie Whitelaw relished the play, even with Beckett directing her with a metronome, but the stage directions made Ms. Shaw’s “blood boil.” In it would be no room for histrionics, no room for spectacle. ‘Freedom’ would be restricted. To Whitelaw, all of the elements of the play “flowed absolutely like *perpetual mobile*,” whereas Shaw found Beckett’s directions akin to “linguistic fascism.” In the end, Warner and Shaw of course settled on *Happy Days*. If Winnie could live with her predicament, they it seems, to a degree, could live with Beckett’s ‘despotism.’ It is all a matter of what one sings as one suffers, or what one chooses as an antidote to alleviate nihilism during intermission because one wishes to luxuriate in subpar antics.

If as Ben-Zvi believes there are stereotypes in Beckett’s plays, Winnie may perhaps be the prime example of one. Shaw said she was always biased against the play precisely because she felt Winnie to be “some fifties housewife,” and Warner echoed Shaw’s vision of Winnie but more critically, focusing on audience reception. “I don’t think 1950s housewives do it for us anymore. We don’t know many of them.” Yet, do that many “1950s housewives” carry handguns and quote Shakespeare, Milton, Thomas Gray, and, to name one more amongst the swarm of other ghosts in Winnie’s unconscious, Sir Robert Burton? A large number of housewives clearly can’t parrot Sir Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Alone, that is a unique feat. Whatever the case, is it not permissible for Beckett to portray such a woman’s life? If anything, the prejudice seems to lie in their minds and not Beckett’s. Since according to them Winnie is so alien to “us” she was based instead on a successful London publisher, which is who Shaw said she could relate to. “She isn’t Winnie,” Shaw confessed, “but she is who Winnie would like to be.” In locating her in “the positive, it places her in the center of a universe that is much larger than just suburban Dublin.” If suburban Dublin is Winnie’s world, must it be other? Since Elsinore is alien to most, Hamlet by the same logic should be set in SoHo. All this is highly suspect. When Bruno Ganz portrayed Hitler in *Downfall*, he didn’t make him friendlier or locate him more in “the positive” because he couldn’t relate to him. And while 1950s housewives may be something of an anomaly, if that’s what Winnie is, does Warner, to pursue her logic further, know any princes and kings? Since most of us don’t, what to do with Hamlet and Lear? They are surely more rarefied than housewives, but only a pedestrian director would be myopic enough to search for contemporary corollaries to them. That we have such pedestrian directors doesn’t validate the decision; it only confirms the mediocrity and the limits of the compass of our artists. What is the necessity to contemporize but an obsession with

one's own epoch; a tedious desire to be perpetually up to date, and a lack of interest in everything but what one can directly relate to. What of what is alien to us? What of the untimely? And what of fidelity to an artist's vision? Put lipstick on Hamlet, make him a transvestite, stage it in a disco; make the battle between the Montagues and the Capulets a battle between Ian Schrager and Donald Trump; turn Macbeth into the CEO of a high profile stock and bonds company. What such directors would give us is not and never Shakespeare, but the paucity of their own imaginations. Here the lack of mythic orientation in our culture is painfully evident. In the act of transposing the mythic or archetypal into the quotidian, or replacing such with quotidian realities, there is a contemporary echo of Euripides' desacralization of tragedy, which Nietzsche diagnosed as instigating its death. Beckett, like Shakespeare, is akin to the Promethean tragic poets, but such directors want to replace what is 'mythic' in them with the "faithful mask of reality," revealing what Nietzsche called 'the deviant nature of their tendencies.' Instead of ascending to the heights of what they engage with, they reduce what is monumental to their own circumscribed perspective, flattening it, literalizing what is figurative, making obvious what through allusion is more perpetually productive of thought. When this occurs, and it occurs all too often in this decadent era, it is only a temporary flattening, and it is under the mark of whatever fashionable director's or actor's name. The work is never truly flattened, only diluted momentarily, or within the sphere of a specific vision. For the height to which such work can rise is clear in the hands of real artists, of artists who justly deserve the nomenclature. Fellini was wise enough to call his Petronius *Fellini's Satyricon*. Is Hamlet as inept as Ethan Hawke makes him in Almereyda's modernization of the play? Encounter Smoktunovsky's Hamlet in Kozintsev's 1964 inimitable film and encounter Hamlet for what Hamlet can be and what we are persuaded Hamlet possibly is. When genius meets genius the light of the aurora borealis dawns on us, or we see the sun ascend into the sky as if for its very first time. That is awe, not imitation, and that is what Beckett demands too and what we should demand of our interpreters of Beckett.

To all of these middling directors and actors however, Beckett is constricting. If they were to perform Beethoven's 5th, they would want to change the key of the symphony 'just to hear what it would sound like.' It would be 'an interesting experiment.' At this point, experimentation is resorted to or relied on out of lack of aesthetic muscle. Of the numerous recordings that exist of Beethoven's late string quartets, Edward Beckett, who performs frequently as a flautist, noted that "every interpretation is different, one from the next, but they are all based on the same notes, tonalities, dynamic and tempo markings. We feel justified in asking the same measure of respect for Samuel Beckett's plays." For those who refuse such respect, in their desire to infect Beckett's work with novelties or alter it according to whims not in harmony with the play, what they reveal is not the limits of his work, but the limits of their own vision and of what they

become when they are confronted with boundaries. It is easy to be ‘creative’ when given every license but rarely does this result in something so singular. The true test of a creator’s abilities is in the measure against a boundary. “To ‘give style’ to one’s character,” Nietzsche says,



is a grand and a rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fashion them into an artistic plan, until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weakness delights the eye. [. . .] In the end, when the work has been completed, it is revealed how the constraint of a single taste organized and formed everything large and small. Whether the taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!

It will be the strong and imperious natures that experience the most refined joy in such constraint and perfection under a law of their own . . . It is the reverse with weak characters that have no power over themselves, and *hate* the constraint of style. They feel that if this bitter and evil constraint were imposed upon them they would be demeaned: they become slaves as soon as they serve; they hate to serve. . . Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is ever ready to avenge himself on that account: we others will be his victims, if only in having always to endure his ugly aspect. For the aspect of the ugly makes one bad and gloomy.

—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

The directors and actors who meet with the boundaries that Beckett demarcated in his work hardly seem to be in possession of dimensions so expansive that he truly suffocates their potentialities. With the National Gate’s production of *Happy Days*, what is revealed is precisely a weakness; the work is indicative of characters that lack power over themselves and “*hate* the constraint of style.” To Warner and Shaw, Beckett’s constraints are demeaning, and before them they become slaves, albeit rebellious ones, and we are their victims. To circumvent Beckett’s constraints, and to circumvent the abyss of Beckett’s world, *Happy Days* has been made into a comedy. The main quote on the BAM flyer, which is from the *Daily Telegraph*, is indicative of the approach to the play; the largest and boldest statement on the flyer is that the play is “wonderfully funny.” Warner’s comment that her mood after the play is “up!” and that *Happy Days* is “very, very funny”

further reinforces their attenuation of the play through ignoring the abyss in which it occurs. It also reveals their unabashed appeal to the masses and their desire to make Beckett as inviting as Neil Simon, which most of the press has blindly seconded. Aesthetic integrity is of little importance, but comfort, entertainment, and ceaseless pleasure are the ruling lords. To this promiscuous age, Beckett's aesthetic principles are not discernible for what they truly are—noble. To be an artist to most today means to be able to 'do whatever one wants'; that however is not freedom, but a mode of dissipation and decadence. Granted, there are funny moments throughout *Happy Days*, but when it is geared in its entirety to producing them and making of Winnie's optimism something inherently positive, the truly funny moments lose their effectiveness and the terrifying optimism is wholly emptied of its irony. The humor is there, but so is the darkness, and that, Mr. Watson, is elementary. There is a clear difference between heroism and obstinacy, tenaciousness and courage, nobility and dumb resistance. In Winnie's optimism there is blindness and lack of perception; a naïveté that reveals an inability or refusal to confront reality. No matter how many times she polishes her spectacles, she will never be able to see, just as she can hardly read the letters on her toothbrush. Beckett emphasizes the occlusion of Winnie's sight with real force through her oxen persistence while the blazing light in which she resides is as bright as she is blind. To leave the play happy as many say they do is to be insensate to its reality, and, in part, the problem resides in the approach to the whole production.

Originally produced in New York City and directed by Alan Schneider in 1961, Beckett's *Happy Days* has received several incarnations in New York, including the 1998 Mabou Mines production directed by Robert Woodruff and featuring Ruth Maleczek. The National Gate Theatre of Great Britain production directed by Deborah Warner premiered at the Lyttelton Theatre and played from January 18 – March 1, 2007. Recently it was at the Kennedy Center in Washington and will run from January 8 – February 2, 2008 at BAM's Harvey Theater in Brooklyn. Aside from Fiona Shaw, it features Tim Potter as an explicitly onanistic Willie, with Potter ably conveying Willie's enervated state. The sound score by Mel Mercier captured the tonality and temper of Beckett's play more than any other element in the production. The initial moment is arresting, for one feels as if one has entered what Cioran called a posthumous universe. The faint scent of dirt and smoke evoke the demoniacal topography of the play, awakening one's other senses, preparing one for its cruel reality. Yet the infernal or sublime quality Mercier's music invokes is quickly dispelled for literalness. Beckett describes the scenario of *Happy Days* as an "expanse of scorched grass rising centre to low mound. Gentle slopes down to front and either side of stage. [. . .] Maximum of simplicity and symmetry." A low mound with gentle slopes was far from at hand, let alone maximum simplicity and symmetry, thus eliminating the tension

between the reality of the play and its landscape. In its wake, after the thin white curtain that conceals Winnie falls to the ground and is whisked away, the spectators are presented with what resembled an industrial lot broken up by an earthquake. Subtlety it was immediately clear was not to be expected for the rest of the production, and it was not.

The image at the head of this essay is indicative of Warner's general directorial approach, which, in this production, is to accentuate to the degree of obviousness, emphasizing what should be suggested, highlighting what should be alluded to, and making conscious the unconscious, or articulating what should remain implied. Whenever Winnie removed the gun from her handbag, or held it in her hands, she pointed it directly at herself for a sustained period of time, as if the mere presence of the gun didn't clearly suggest peril. Further strident gaffes occurred throughout the performance with the most reprehensible being what earlier was referred to as luxuriating in subpar antics. As Cioran observed, every time Beckett would veer towards lyricism or metaphysics, he would have "his characters erupt in hiccups or other fits," an abrupt shift employed to restrain his characters from succumbing to hope, for, to Beckett, lyricism and metaphysics are but empty modes of hope. During the intermission, Warner chose to play the theme song to a sophomoric American sitcom with the same name as the play. If Beckett deliberately short circuited any instance of lyricism or metaphysics, he certainly would find such a tenth-rate interlude ill-fitting, not to say of little taste. While Warner's use of the song may seem relatively incidental to some and this point strained, it is given particular stress because of its absolute lack of necessity. Beckett's works are especially refined and precise, like Pompeian frescoes, or a composition such as Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, making any such 'addition' an excrescence, thus a true disfigurement of the play. Of *Pierrot Lunaire*, Schoenberg warned that "to whatever extent the composer felt a tone-pictorial representation of the actions and feelings indicated in the text to be important, it is simply to be found in the music. Where the performer does not find such representation, *he should refrain from adding anything that the composer did not want*. In this instance, he would not be adding, but rather detracting." In bringing poetry that has been through the void into drama, a poetry born of thinking in new dimensions, Beckett's work demands to be guided by aesthetic decisions that have an equal intensity, rigor, and taste. His work is as Cioran noted "so impregnated with poetry that it is inseparable from it." Instead of taking one deeper into the play, Warner's supplement jettisoned one from it into a banal consumerist reality harshly antithetical to the setting of the play. Poetry, to say the least, was not what she evoked. *Happy Days* is a kind of *colla voce* between the habitual or ritualized movements of Winnie and the words that she utters, both sibilate and susurrate, which punctuate her gestures in the abyss. In the midst of this music of word and gesture, throughout it actually, there are

silences. Of the 118 pauses in the text, some of which are to be lengthy, few of them were evident during the performance. Silence, like nihilism, was dispensed with almost entirely. The gestures, too, have a geometric precision that adds to the architectural beauty of the play, but that sharpness was lost on Shaw, as the necessity of that sharpness was obviously lost on Warner. Instead of finding “the most refined joy in such constraint and perfection,” they disavowed accuracy for casual, imprecise gestures better suited to realistic drama. If there is an artist’s work analogous to Beckett, it is not Degas or Dix. It is Giacometti. As is well known, Giacometti designed the stage set for the 1961 production of *Waiting for Godot*, and the two artists, whose lives were predicated on an aesthetic of failure and impossibility, were close friends. In not taking the aesthetic demands of the play seriously, its austere beauty is grossly marred. What it necessitates is an actor with the training of an Olympic athlete, such as Ryszard Cieslak, or Hijikata Tatsumi, the inventor of Butoh, if not simply any well trained Butoh performer. While Shaw lacks this precision and intense physicality, in the midst of the first act, after vacillating between mild effectiveness and some degree of greater control, her performance grew more condensed and affecting. While physically her gestures were too slipshod, aimlessly did she gesticulate, she was emotionally engaging. Shaw is adept at articulating with definite particularity Winnie’s multifarious voices. Her voice is powerful and has the elasticity and color necessary for Beckett’s heroines. Ultimately though, her characterization of Winnie alters the anatomy of the play, and the appreciation of moments of Shaw’s performance becomes an empty regard for an actor’s technique. It’s a separation into pieces of what should remain whole. Interestingly enough, Shaw was most compelling in the brief second act when she could not move. All of her energy and force was crystallized into her voice and it was mesmerizing. Yet that act was played with such literalness that the horror that is Winnie’s optimism was lost. Shaw was ferocious and vituperative, perorating like a figure from the 9th circle of hell, at times almost howling and barking like a beast. She was more like a bedraggled and homeless whore from the Bowery than the Winnie of the first act, partially because Warner decided to black out her teeth—another bizarre and unnecessary liberty that detracted from and did not enhance or illuminate the play. Yet one more peculiar alteration occurred at the most active if not climactic moment of the play, making it all the more glaring. Although he was sporting a top hat and fine dress shirt and tie, Willie wasn’t exactly “dressed to kill” as Beckett described him. Sleeves unbuttoned and askew, Willie came crawling out, jacket dragging along the ground, in dirty long underwear, eradicating once again Beckett’s unerring sense of irony. Where Beckett is subtle, they are barbarous. Further, the second act was lit as if it took place in an infernal region, suggesting nightfall, thus eliminating entirely the absurdity of the opening line, “Hail, holy light,” and the stasis of the world of the play, a world which is entirely without night and without cycles and is nothing but an incessant and eternally recurring present.

If Winnie is optimistic and 'happy,' her happiness is frightening, to some Beckett scholars more frightening even than the despair of *Endgame*, but this dread is wholly lost on these interpreters and most of the reviewers of the play, who write as if irony didn't exist and Winnie's happiness no different from Juliet's. It's true that "what Beckett offers to thought" is not necessarily "gloomy relinquishment" as Badiou argues. "The lesson of Beckett" he posits "is a lesson in measure, exactitude and courage." While this is a refreshing interpretation of Beckett's work, one has to ask, what is that courage for? Utter, let alone absolute despair doesn't exist in Beckett's work. True, and I concur that Beckett was in fact "a constant and attentive servant of beauty," which Badiou persuasively argues, but it is still the beauty of oblivion. What the work is as art is distinct from what the work posits as a worldview. It is not that there is no hope in the universe, or in Beckett's *interpretation* of the universe, which is his truthful representation of the world, but that hope is not easily gained. Godot is not dead, but he has yet to ever arrive; unlikely however is his ever arriving. Optimism let us remember is for Beckett something pernicious, it is a sign as he said in *Proust* of our "smug will to live" and, unfortunately he declares, it is an incurable disease. The hope prevalent in most of the world, or in most of the opinions that pass for thought in the world, is the empty and mawkish hope of the herd, which bears down upon those who are devoid of cheery optimism, for not to be anesthetically merry is to be suspect if not very near felonious. There is something clearly absurd in Winnie's optimism and happiness, a myopia that is made terrifyingly clear through her inability to recognize the utter meaninglessness of her existence. It is a "blessing" to her that "nothing grows" and it is wonderful that "one can do nothing," save perhaps adapt, which is also "wonderful!" But there are things that we shouldn't adapt to and in adapting to them our stupidity and our weakness is frightfully apparent. This is the dumb optimism of America, which must be perpetually happy or to use a vacuous and irritating idiom common for some time and still in use today: "It's all good." Is it? Even in Malebolge? To any awakened creature, the tragic reality is different. But to Winnie and those of her faction it is 'all good,' and happily they chatter away in the dark eternal night. The gauntlet nonetheless remains and the pessimist is stronger for in recognizing that truth, tragic knowledge is gained.

The literature that exists—one cannot say lives—in Winnie is dead to her, too. The use of her parasol, the brushing of her teeth, the combing of her hair, the application of her lipstick, the rummaging through her bag: all are equally useful means for 'getting through the day' no different from her parroting of literature. When the day comes when words fail, for "there are times when even they fail," she will simply "brush and comb the hair" in order to sustain herself. Winnie is of the generation of women who attended 'finishing' school in order to cultivate themselves and refine their manners. With them, silent or awkward moments are not to occur, which is to say, *the anxiety of existence*

is to be continuously circumvented and annulled. Winnie and her kind have been trained to be perpetually gracious and to always have something to say. That is ‘the old style’ and while to a degree it is charming, it is also facetious and hollow. When she quotes, she quotes as if from an anthology, and what she utters are precisely that—quotes. It is not as if she has read books, and here we are closing in on the heart of the matter, if not one of the very atoms of the play. Generally, she prefaces every utterance of a quote with the statement “What is that wonderful line?” But she also ‘quotes’ literature without even knowing it, or rather words invade her daily patter, erupting from her unconscious like sharp prods.

“

I’ll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, *until they find me, until they say me*, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, *perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story*, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on. I can’t go on, I’ll go on.

—Beckett, *The Unnamable*

To quote is to remember the literature that lives in one, not to be said. Winnie however never refers to any specific writer, play, or poem except when quoting Browning. Despite their bleakness, and all of the lines that are part of Winnie’s monologue, as Brennan observed, are from literature “that is concerned with confronting death or with despair at the limited amount of time we have on earth,” they are all ‘wonderful.’ In this, the utter superficiality of her relation to them is clear, as well as her blindness of her condition or her obstinate refusal to acknowledge it. She knows not of what she speaks and has no significant bond to the texts that exist in her.

“

I say confusedly what comes uppermost;
But there are times when patience proves at fault,
As now: this morning’s strange encounter - you
Besides me once again.

—Browning, “Paracelsus”

Clearly, patience is definitely a fault in Winnie’s case; it is useless and futile,

like Sisyphus forcing his rock continually up the hill. That, one may say, is his fate, but if such is one's fate, when is continuing to live an abomination of life itself and our inability to bravely end our lives a curse upon existence? There is never any instant, or rare is it that Winnie responds emotionally to the texts she quotes or which ascend into her memory. What invades her does not awaken her as what invaded Wordsworth as he recorded in *The Prelude*. The visitations of thought provoked in him further thought and reflection whereas Winnie doesn't think or reflect. Like an automaton, she operates because the gears drive her to. "Things have a life" she says, and they don't need her. In Winnie then is there not our inability to end things when we should, the stupidity of our clinging to life when life is barely present? Of our adapting to what we should fiercely resist? In *Happy Days*, it is a posthumous universe that we are in and Beckett let us not forget began writing his dramatic works just after World War II. It seems wholly forgotten by Warner, Shaw, and many critics that Winnie's life is bleak, absurd, and senseless, and that it endlessly recurs, which intensifies the bleakness to as extreme a degree as possible. Optimism, perhaps, but in not facing senselessness is real cowardice. It is the idiocy of Pangloss who before the grossest atrocities still declares that this world is the best of all possible worlds. Is that not America's ailment? Is not Beckett critiquing precisely such blind optimism through Winnie, who chews literature like a cow but never digests it? She uses quotes like Hamm uses painkillers, staving off suffering to remain insensate. Woe, woe is her, but blasted like Ophelia with ecstasy she is not; because she never truly encompasses it, it is only an empty woe that she cants, sounding off like a jukebox at the mercy of the mechanics of her body, which she is not aligned with. There are instances when she reveals insight into her condition, but they are exceedingly brief and she hastily dispels them, busying herself with one of her empty activities to stave off the reckoning. *Happy Days* is also one might say about, in a sense, the death of literature, or about the disembowelment and abuse of it. To imbibe literature as Winnie does is to be lost to it, to be insensate to expressiveness, to formal geometric beauty, to what words evoke and express. It is to eviscerate literature of its force through empty repetition, through fragmented connections to it instead of intimate involvement. If one knows only shards of *Hamlet*, what real force can the words actually have, divorced from their context? They lose their weight, they lose their sense, thus they lose in effect *their gravity* and that is meant almost literally. Out of the structure of their cosmos, the world of the book in which they exist, they float in the air and are cast about like seeds in the wind. Books however are not for idling through; that is to disgrace them. "It is not at all easy to understand the blood of another," says Zarathustra. "I hate all those readers who are idlers."

Is not Winnie one of these idling readers, as many of her interpreters are? Winnie's entrapment in the earth is sometimes read as a punishment, which raises the question as to what precisely may have caused it, with her deeper

enclosure in the earth in the second act intensifying the ‘punishment’ even more. What, some have questioned, has occurred in the first act to warrant, if anything, the intensification of Winnie’s ‘punishment’? In the second act, Winnie’s ability to recall quotes, or for quotes to arise in her mind, is considerably lessened. What may be at work here is that, in the first act, they were forced out by her unconscious to give her insight into her condition, yet she couldn’t make use of them. “Something says, stop talking now,” she observes, but she never can cease talking to imbibe what arises in her mind. Since she gains no lasting insight into her state, words do not come to her as often as they did in the first act. It is not punishment, that is too literal a reading of the dramatic event, but *a deeper collapse into obscurity*, or immobility, and she is very nearly buried up to her mouth. What it seems this may be symbolic of is a lack of awareness. To be devoid of insight or to lack perception of one’s condition is to be paralyzed. It is a rigidity born of ignorance, thus it is senseless to think of Winnie as a kind of earth figure, as some regard her. There is nothing fertile about Winnie; she is not a generative force. Demeter she is not. She is a degenerative force and the earth is swallowing her. She is indicative perhaps of our inability to make sense of our selves and the world because of our inability to make sense of literature.



In the end, no one can “hear” more out of things, books included, than he already knows. Whatever one has no access to through experience one has no ears for.

—Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*

A lack of an intimate, personal engagement with literature yields nothing but a superficial relation to it such as Winnie’s, which ends in an empty parroting of words instead of an excoriating insight. In place of reading entire texts, Winnie has read but quotes in anthologies, pithy lines from quotation books to ‘pepper’ her discourse with ‘wonderful’ statements whose meaning she knows not.



That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one’s classics, to help one through the day.

—Beckett, *Happy Days*

Literature is simply something which facilitates passage through a day, like combing one’s hair, brushing one’s teeth, gazing at oneself in the mirror, or gingerly fingering a gun. It is merely a restorative to keep her happy and

optimistic, no different from the medicine she consumes in the first act. What is to come?

It is oft imagined that Winnie will sing her song as she sinks slowly into the earth, but this might not be her fate. It is a trajectory that the play logically moves towards, but the song is a crucial dramatic event, perhaps the most decisive moment in the play. It is the instant in time, and the only one in the play, when the discord between the mind and the body is overcome. Song is the one thing that is not under the dominion of habit for Beckett, and habit for him is purely negative. There is no distinction between positive and negative habits for Beckett.

“

Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals . . . The Gideans advocate a habit of living-and look for an epithet. A nonsensical bastard phrase. They imply a hierarchy of habits, as though it were valid to speak of good and bad habits. An automatic adjustment of the human organism to the conditions of its existence has as little moral significance as the casting of a clout when May is or is not out; and the exhortation to cultivate a habit as little sense as an exhortation to cultivate a coryza.
—Beckett, *Proust*

Song though is the one true spontaneous event; it triumphs over habit. “It must” as Winnie says “come from the heart,” “pour out from the inmost, like a thrush.” “One cannot sing” she later says, “just like that. It bubbles up, for some unknown reason.”

“

Imagination—lifting up itself
Before the eye and the progress of my song
Like an unfathered vapor, here that power,
In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me! I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through;
And now, recovering, to my soul I say
“I recognize thy glory.” In such strength
Of usurpation, in such visitings of
Awful promise, when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shown to us
The invisible world, does greatness make abode,

There harbors whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our nature, and our home,
Is with infinitude, and only there—
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.
—Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805)

Music for Beckett, as for his philosophical mentor Schopenhauer, exists above all arts. It is not that “music is the Idea itself” as Beckett thought though, but that “it passes over the Ideas,” as Schopenhauer actually said. The important difference between it and the other arts according to Schopenhauer is that it is not “a copy of the Ideas, but a copy of the will itself, the objectivity of which are the Ideas.” In *Happy Days*, song is the unexpected gift, the gift that Winnie searches for in Willie in the first act, and which she longs for in herself, and which she has been hoping for all along. Suddenly, at the very end of the play, Winnie is able to break into song, or rather song erupts out of her like a shoot spontaneously breaking forth from the ground. In this, the body and the mind finally coalesce. It is a rare moment of unification, and she and Willie gaze at one another in silence after it occurs. It is the awakening of perception, the opening of man; the shattering of what Blake called the ‘narrow chinks of our caverns.’ Here perhaps is the play’s actual optimism. It is not in Winnie’s blind happiness, it is not in what all of the critics believe it is, but it is in this final extraordinary moment. What does not or has not been able to happen or occur throughout the entire play finally happens. What possibly follows after the play ends, to articulate the suggestions it yields: the suicide of Willie, murder of Winnie, combined murder/suicide, the kiss of tenderness, Win’s total burial, the repetition of the first act (all magically appears as at the start of the day as Winnie informs us), or, Win’s release from the ground after the song, a signal more hopeful than any other in Beckett’s work, though it could and more than likely is merely a fleeting instant, a small triumph and brief overcoming that will soon or eventually end as nothing persists or is sustained forever—we must continually achieve things as we must continually become who we are. After, a day or so of peace if not real joy and communication between Winnie and Willie may occur only for them to return to the heap of days and the infernal burial. Twenty to thirty years of habit cannot be broken so easily; such conditioned responses are granitic. To free oneself of them is as difficult as an addict’s attempt at overcoming or breaking long developed and deeply ingrained behavior, an internal structure, like a petrified foundation, that takes years to reconfigure. Whereas to destroy such a foundation may not take as long as to build one, after the destruction, a new edifice must be constructed. Patience is its only captain, and courage, but those are not such easily sustainable forces. We are obstinate more in our futility than in

our ability to engender real transformations, which are exceedingly difficult to achieve, for rare is it we have the measure, exactitude, and courage to make such lasting transformations. Cioran compared Beckett to what is said of Buddhist adepts seeking illumination, which is that they “must be as relentless as ‘a mouse gnawing on a coffin.’ Every authentic writer makes a similar effort. He is a destroyer who adds to existence—who enriches by undermining it.” In undermining existence, Beckett returns it to us in its crystalline beauty, shorn of its false hope, declaring as Badiou noted “what we must disregard in order to face up to what may be of worth.” That is the beauty of oblivion, which we must tirelessly sculpt and shape, guided by the strength of a positive pessimism. It is that alone which is capable of bearing tragic wisdom, of truthfully confronting the abyss. Only then can we nobly bear what vexes us with any degree of honesty.

Mediated Understandings

by Nicholas Birns

Deep Trance Behavior in Potatoland

(A Richard Foreman Theater Machine)

Ontological-Hysteric Theater, New York

January 22 – April 13, 2008

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**HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



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**Deep Trance Behavior in Potatoland
(A Richard Foreman Theater Machine)
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Seen: January 20, 2008**

by Nicholas Birns

Richard Foreman's recent turn towards making extensive use of film in his theatrical productions evokes the argument of Philip Auslander in his seminal book *Liveness*: that the traditional distinction between 'live' and recorded media is no longer tenable in today's technological milieu. Not only do we watch 'live' telecasts of events that are in fact only conveyed to us through highly mediated mechanisms, but even when we see 'live' action in front of us, Auslander argues, our expectations of what we should see are influenced by our far more frequent encounters with recorded action, images, or sound—so liveness for us cannot be what liveness was for, say, the Victorians. Foreman's intermingling of the 'live' and the recorded summons what Friedrich Kittler might call the postmodern "discourse network."

The unlikely cultural similarities between Britain and Japan have long been pointed out by cultural analysts, for instance, the late David Titus of Wesleyan University. Both countries are made up of islands with often vexed relationships to the large continental land masses which adjoin them. In the terms of Gilles Deleuze, Britain and Japan think they are Oceanic islands—thus Orwell's use of 'Oceania' for the English-speaking totalitarian state in *1984*—despite the attempts of China, France, and Germany to periodically see them as Continental islands. Thus the near-total Japanization of any foreign import, from Buddhism to baseball; thus the long-established xenophobia of England, which has, in our day, been stanchied not by any sort of Europeanization but through the growing racial diversity of the contemporary United Kingdom.

Both Japan and Britain are constitutional monarchies whose royal family is valued in affective and symbolic terms long after all actual power has passed from their hands. Both have traditional class systems that have had to engage with more egalitarian discourses; for the past few centuries tea has played an important role in both cultures. In his latest multimedia production, *Deep Trance Behavior in Potatoland*, Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater takes this uncanny resemblance as his premise in a challenging production that ultimately sweeps far more beneath its purview.

The performance space is not separated from the audience by a glass shield as in recent Foreman productions. It contained two small pianos (never actually played), a large white basin on a red stand towards the back (complemented by a similar basin towards the left of the space). Two clocks—one hanging from the ceiling, the other on the wall flanking the space

to the right—ticked in real time through the performance, letting the audience know exactly how much time was left in a piece explicitly advertised as lasting one hour, two minutes. A glass-framed cabinet, eventually revealing various blankets and bibelots, stood at the right end of the space, flanked by Victorian spirit photographs on the wall; these are also on the floor. Four small light bulbs hung in a pendant fixture suspended from the ceiling. About 20 of the bulbs were placed beneath the large screen at the back of the space.

The décor of a Foreman set is important to think about because its effect often sharply divagates from its initial impression. When viewers first confront the set, they see items that could be the inventory of an old curiosity shop: bric-a-brac, old furniture, various hand-me-down items with a faded glory or piquancy. But what might seem to be an effort at quirky nostalgia or a general period style ends up testifying to a fragmentation of a totality of which the bric-a-brac items are mere shards. In other words, they seem to be vestiges of the past, but end up being the rubble of modernity. It is later than we think, later than the bric-a-brac has initially prompted us to think. This is particularly crucial when the production's on-screen images evoke unified images of other cultures, against which the 'live' actors on stage display a deliberately far less coherent and organic impression.

The haunted, disembodied nature of the set of *Deep Trance* is emblemized by the fact that it also contains Victorian spirit photographs of the sort displayed a few years ago at the Metropolitan Museum—photographs that were claimed by those who took them to actually capture spirit visitations, and which are somewhere between overt hoaxes and materially configured séances on which at the very least the yearnings for transcendence, if not its empirical manifestation, are troped. In its wish to bridge life and death, matter, and spirit, the Victorian photography frames and illustrates the piece's concern with bridging the ostensibly real and the allegedly unreal, between past and present, life and death, animate and inanimate, subject and object.

A woman, *The Girl with the Golden Dress* (Caitlin Rucker) enters the space. She swallows a pill, which on one narrative level (itself, ironically, a rather realistic topology) takes us into the dream-world, the trespassing of barriers, that encompasses the rest of the piece, which is seen as a sort of nomadic night-vision. This is a gesture that is repeated throughout the piece—with ambiguous reverberation. Is this a moment of privileged access to the sacred, to the extraordinary, a trip to fairyland? Or is it a mordant comment on the way our contemporary equivalents of the transports of past ages is the anodyne of prescription drugs, which, the novelist Sylvia Engdahl has recently contended in *Stewards of the Flame*, are arguably the most effective current means of social control. Is an otherworld conjured by taking a pill necessarily an ersatz otherworld? Or does the numinous end transcend the prefabricated means? Is the repetition of the gesture ritualistic, accumulating a succession

of enacted meanings, or does the repetition make it trivial, render it parodic? These sorts of questions recur throughout the piece, and with respect both to what happens immediately before us and on screen. *Deep Trance* does not permit us to assess it squarely or straightforwardly; we continually reassess not only what we see but our own role as spectators during the course of the performance.

The first actor is soon followed by Girl in the Sailor Hat (McDonough Thayer) and Girl with Black Hair (Fulya Peker), the only character not named, metonymically, by an article of clothing, also the only female character who does not wear red-striped socks. The theme of red in the décor and the actors' clothing is at once colorful and disturbing, with a sustaining force whose gaudiness can also alarm. The three actors display themselves in almost reverent postures. Stillness, or at least the taut potential of movement, is a major technique of the piece's 'live' aspect; it is a stillness given torque by the marked characteristics—usually denominated in terms of clothing—displayed by the actors. Throughout the piece, it is vision as much as movement that focuses our attention on the 'live' performance. The effect is far less choreographic than in earlier Foreman pieces. But music is unobtrusively present throughout, including intriguing melancholic snippets from Mihaly Vig's soundtrack to Bela Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies*, a film whose dream-like evocation of a world whose constraints and modern uncertainties resembles Foreman's evocation of old Japan and old England as witnessed through the prism in today's America. There is also a brief, rousing American carousel-tune which spurts up in the middle of the piece, providing a wakeup call so jolting as to be almost disruptive in its hearty merriment. Images, 'live' and on screen, and spoken phrases, in various languages, dominate the scene, true to Bonnie Marranca's early characterization of Foreman as a practitioner of the theater of images.

The spoken phrases, voiced by Foreman and his wife, Kate Manheim, help frame the themes of the play. As, on duplicated screens, a woman strides down a corridor, regally gazing at the audience, the three women on the 'live' level scoot towards a glass cabinet. A voiceover intones: "Go to Japan." There is an invocation of a "mental window," a proving for the "real." A male actor (Joel Israel, playing "Man In Striped Suit") came onstage, looking foppish. A fourth female character, Girl With The Tiara (Sarah Dahlen) also manifests herself, scooting around the stage more boisterously than the other performers. Then comes the first of the piece's major verbal leitmotifs: "He who drinketh the water never shall thirst." This line from the *Gospel of John* seems, in context, to refer less to direct spiritual revelation than to the wisdom offered by cultural contrast, by an evocation of a Japan that the theoretical frame of the play concedes to be expressly fictive.

As has been true of all three of Foreman's productions since, in 2006, he

began to give film as much emphasis as 'live' action in his work, sometimes the action on screen mirrors what is happening 'live,' sometimes there seems a deliberate disjunction, sometimes no relation at all. Measuring the correspondence of screen to site is part of the interpretive and responsive work required of the audience. Five minutes into the piece, the action seems disjoined on the screen as several of the actors caterwaul in the 'live' space. But, for most of the piece, there seems to be more frenzy on screen, while the 'live' level is characterized by an eerie, limpid calm.

The calm, though, is certainly not without interruption. Several times during the performance, the house lights are dramatically switched on, breaking the frame usually maintained during a traditional performance, as if to alert the audience and prevent them from succumbing to any absorption into the tableau. In addition, from the left of the space an actor in a large green bird suit enters, with the legend "King Hummingbird" (perhaps reminiscent of Foreman's 2004 piece *King Cowboy Rufus Rules The Universe*, a parody aimed at George W. Bush in the wake of what at the time seemed his Iraq triumph) and bearing several small American flags on his shoulder, as if to break the illusion of cultural tourism-cum-explanation fostered by the exotic Japanese settings on the screen.

But what of the British level? This indeed is the most vexatious question of the piece, as the English images are simply not as frequent or as compelling as the Japanese ones. Despite receiving equal billing in the structure of the production, there is a noticeable asymmetry between the production's own investment in the Japanese level and the stake it musters in the English referents. As the voiceover announces "Young English People," we see these on the screen, all female, all seemingly privileged and upper class: chic, perky Bright Young Things. This is disconcerting when a young person in England today is as likely to be of West Indian, Bangladeshi, or Cypriot descent. The Japanese scenes seem far more varied both in terms of gender and cultural milieu. But is this difference deceptive? Are we lulled by our greater familiarity with things English, our jaunty ease with them? The audience laughs at the line about young English people, which itself is said with a kind of latent humor, whereas the contemplation of Japan is portentous and laden with the burden of cultural crossover, tourism, contamination. What we may not notice are the Victorian spirit photographs, which are by old, dead English people and attempt to claim to picture the spirits of other old, dead English people returned to life. In this way, the spirit photographs are the English-ghostly equivalent of the manifest ghostliness of the filmed Japanese locations.

But the very readability of both live and dead Englishness makes us wonder if there are there cultural codes in the Japanese settings that we cannot decipher. Do we need to look at that which is closer to us with a more detached, clinical distance? Like the young English people, the actors on

stage are young and attractive as well, certainly appearing closer to the English portions of the screened imagery than the Japanese. There is far more racial diversity in the Japanese filmic sections—although it is an old-fashioned sort of racial diversity, the modernist wholly other—not the postmodern hybrid, not a racial diversity in which London is far more multi-ethnic in composition than Tokyo, as is indeed true today. Indeed, the use of Japan in the piece—which Foreman concedes is touristy and an exoticist construct—seems to evoke Modernist anthropology more than postmodern Diasporas. As is discussed below, one is never certain how seriously Foreman takes his premises, and his use of the Japan/England frame may be just to explode it, or to unfold an elegy of the era in which it held as consistently as the piece seems to want it to do. This raises a question not just of culture but of media: Are we meant to compare one to the other, or to judge the two media fundamentally different? Is the idea of film and the idea of ‘live’ action evoked in the piece anymore congruent, formally or culturally, than the Japan and England sections of the filmed action? At the end of the piece, one appreciates the way Foreman has shown us that there is script in ‘live’ action, liveness in recorded film; what we might desire is more of a sense of concomitant racial diversity, both in the actors and in the audience. Foreman’s Britain is that of *Masterpiece Theater*, not of Zadie Smith or Monica Ali; his Japan is that of Lafcadio Hearn, not Banana Yoshimoto or Hitomi Kanehara. Foreman knows this, and makes artistic capital of the dreaminess and knowing artificiality and inadequacy of his vision. But the audience had better be sure it is aware of these circumstances, as well. People who have read a certain amount of recent theory in the humanities will have difficulty seeing anything as pure dream which involves cultural or political alterity—I am too much a disciple of the postmodern rhetoric of suspicion for that. On the other hand, art, particularly Foreman’s art, should not be subjugated to a monolithic or repressive political reading. Simplifiers of Edward Said too often see any attempts by a Westerner to represent the East as imperialistic. Nor is the point to chide Foreman for being out of date. Part of the piece’s subtext is the dramatists’ advancing age, and the entire turn towards film has, as George Hunka has suggested, an atmosphere of confronting mortality and the limit-situations of the last phase of life. A certain amount of distance from the contemporary world is needed for this, and any effort to seem au courant would end up seeming sophomoric. Indeed, it often does so in the work of younger artists who just end up listing reality rather than truly anatomizing or refracting it. But to reach the full depth of Foreman’s vision we must understand how suffused his images and the piece’s entire tableau are by mediation.

This is signified by another recited leitmotif, besides “He that drinketh of this water shall never thirst,” is, “I understand you immediately.” The word “immediately” is sounded with a faint accent, which brings out the little-

noticed aspect of the word “Immediate”—the way that, though it connotes pure presence, that which is before us, here, now, it is nonetheless as a word, mediated. The word itself presumes that, in effect, the natural ontological state is that of mediation, and that the immediate can at best be a momentary negation of it. When ‘I understand you immediately’ is said in a pronouncedly foreign accent, we are meant to conclude that the phrase cannot be true; its very enunciation is mediated. In addition, there is the “media-” in mediated—the fact that the entire piece is constructed out of the very different media of theater and film, and seems to insist that these media are clashing as much as complementary, that they are not simply versions of each other. Each media mediates the other, just as the cultural transpositions, even the all-American King Hummingbird, inflect each other without a determining core. There is no standpoint, even, and especially, for the audience; there is nothing but mediation, and whatever understanding the piece formulates must be, in turn, mediated.

Foreman always raises the issue of how much he is a dramatist of ideas, whether or not his plays have intellectual postulates or take them as premises they then farcically knock around. Certainly Foreman parades ideas as few contemporary American dramatists, realist or avant-garde, do. To see his productions over the decades is to witness the influence of European philosophy on American intellectual life in various phases and deployments. But it would be a mistake to see him as an earnest expositor of ideas, writing *dramas à these*; his relationship to his own postulates is, as Foreman says, ‘off balance’; and ideas can be premises in his work, but seldom conclusions. Crucially, to see the piece as only about England and Japan ignores the many other cultural referents that come into play, some, like playing French phrases that turn out to have been spoken by André Malraux, make sense within the frame (Malraux wrote extensively about Western/Asian cross-fertilization and set his most famous novel in China) but some disrupt it, such as the persistent counting to four in German. In the latter half of the piece, a pronounced Hebrew strand comes into play, with the Hebrew letters “Heth” and “Resh” being prominently displayed on a pull-down screen (this perhaps refers to “Ruach,” the Hebrew word for spirit, although the letters are arranged in the wrong order for this). (The letters of the Hebrew alphabet also serve as numbers.) Even more concertedly, the common Jewish prayer “Baruch atah adonai ha-melech ha-olam,” translated as “Blessed are you God, King of Eternity,” is uttered about three-quarters of the way through the piece. Unlike other Foreman pieces, though, the spirituality seems more horizontal than lateral; bearing witness to the dignity and profundity of cross-cultural encounter—also seen in translation between languages, or adaptations of cultural forms to transplanted contexts—rather than soliciting numinosity from above. “The letter is always dead,” we are informed. But there seems to be no palpably living spirit to transcend the dead letter. The splaying between ‘live’

and screen action—and the way the on-screen action is much more vigorous and frenzied—problematizes the opposition between ‘living’ and ‘dead’—as a repeated phrase wittily notes, “People are never dead if living people are dead when they are living.” This is in a way parabolic of the relationship between the ‘live’ and filmed action, and cautions us not to privilege one above the other as more ‘primary’ or even more ‘real.’ In this way, it testifies against various avatars of what Jacques Derrida might term ‘the metaphysics of presence’—even revisionist, avant-garde, or rebellious versions thereof. A Sixties hippie, for instance, might denounce society as dead, but what the above phrase suggests is that, if, say, bourgeois conformity is dead because it represses the inner spirit, that unhinges the very distinction between living and dead; if the society that is purportedly functional and constructive is already dead, then the secret of death is unbottled and can never conclusively come to haunt us in its most literal manifestation. Film, indeed, may be a kind of mediatized manifestation of the country of death; non-living; yet certainly still animate. This is one of the clearest iterations of the link between avant-garde practice and spirituality in Foreman’s work and in contemporary radical performance in general.

In *Deep Trance Behavior in Potatoland*, the particular grove in which this spirituality flows is that of cross-cultural encounter. Though at times, especially when the living songbird bumptiously strides onto the stage, seeming like a non-objective version of Stephen Sondheim’s *Pacific Overtures*, in its deeper moments the piece reminds us of Dean McCannell’s observations on tourism, that tourism involves the staging of experience and that its approach to the other is conducted with a gravity and curiosity akin to religious faith. Foreman concedes we are not getting “the real Japan”—the glimpses we have of that deferred entity are turbulent, chaotic, psychotic—but something of this striving for, as opposed to the achievement of, the reality of the Other in the Lacanian/Saidian sense, motivates the reverent trance in which ‘live’ actors and audience are enmeshed. As is said by one of the on-screen actors, “I will be here long after you have vanished from my mental world.” What is represented is a kind of plenum that makes both ‘live’ actors and audience question the ontological grounds of their own existence.

By the end, the ‘live’ actors seem somewhat traumatized. The Man in Striped Suit wears an eye patch, testifying to some worldly weathering of his Byronic exuberance, and the Girl with Black Hair hits herself in the head repeatedly with a hammer, evoking such past Foreman productions as *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* and *The Gods Are Pounding My Head*. The Girl with the Tiara places a flower of garlands on the head of the Girl with the Black Hair, a gesture of ceremonial commemoration and mourning. We are reminded that “Big Girls Don’t Cry” (presumably reference to original Four Seasons hit, not the recent Fergie song of the same name). The micro-elegiac feeling this generates with respect to the ‘live’ actors emulates a general feeling of elegy

that has characterized Foreman's recent work (although this elegiac note can be seen as early as 2002's *Maria del Bosco*, an almost unremitting lament). In past productions, the elegiac sense has seemed directed to apolitical or social states now perceived as gone. But here it appears to be verging on an elegy for theater itself, for a form in which Foreman made his career and on which he staked his artistic vision but which he now seems to feel is inadequate. Foreman has stated that much of the frenzy that has characterized his 'live' actors in the past is now manifested on the screen—"manifested" being a better verb than "transferred" or "displaced." Symptomatically, Foreman's last piece before this to have the word 'Potatoland' in the title featured his wife, Kate Manheim, as Rhoda. Three decades later, Manheim is now not on stage, but a voiceover. The sense of stasis on the 'live' level is only reinforced by the final injunction: "The actors are only resting but the performance is over"—leaving a sense of the interminable, the unfinalized, on stage, as the actors, 'playing dead,' are not able to be properly congratulated by the audience. (At the production I attended, several audience members made commendatory remarks as they exited while the actors lay on the ground, prone and unresponsive, 'still resting.') In the course of just over an hour, we have gone from *jeunesse dorée* to desiccated decadence.

This aura is not due to any inadequacy in the production, but is a deliberate, engineered effect of the piece. So, as always in Foreman, is the manic, overcrowded quality of what we see—even though the 'live' action is less frenetic than in the past, we are still bombarded by an excess of stimuli, such that it is impossible to pay full attention to the piece—Foreman's work operates in too many channels for that to happen. There has to be an element of distraction in all art, a vacant space for the audience's mind to wander, otherwise art just becomes, in Benjaminian terms, aestheticized politics. Foreman's pieces are as short as they are because he knows the audience will not be able to pay attention longer. The raising of the lights, and the loud thumping sounds which erupt throughout the play, are ways of reminding the audience to keep alert, but they are also indicators of a distraction that would otherwise prevail. They also permit the actors to see the audience and to scrutinize the audience's behavior, generating an effect that, at one pole, dissolves any last vestige of a mental 'proscenium' between audience and artwork, letting us fully participate in the theatrical process, and, at the other, makes us feel our behavior is being watched and monitored as in Foucault's citation of Jeremy Bentham's vision of the Panopticon. The lighting, though, lacked the aggressiveness of last year's *Wake Up Mr. Sleepy*, when on the occasion of my second viewing of the piece on March 10, 2007, my seatmate almost fainted due to the heat generated by the constant showering of overhead light. In pre-2006 Foreman productions, the audience was entertained by the irreverent, freewheeling exuberance of the action immediately before it; the filmic sections do not generate the same kind of

intimacy. Perhaps the audience is resisting Foreman's tacit suggestion that we are also mediated, also, as it were, 'on film.'

Foreman's turn to film can be seen as a manifestation of what Edward Said calls 'late style'—the style of an artist late in his career, not necessarily their most lyrical or ebullient style, but their most complex, most multilayered, most, to quote the subtitle of Said's book *On Late Style*, 'against the grain.' Late style no longer asks to be measured as part of the artist's maturation, the appeal to cultural consensus, the adherence to general scenarios. Late style transpires when an artist, no longer bound by the struggle for recognition loses herself or himself in their inner and ultimate complexity, is in a way free to be more than just herself or himself (Beethoven's late string quartets, for instance). The utopian urgency of Foreman's multimedia practice now, late in its unfolding, has a tragic dignity to it, an elegiac lament, signified by the film, whose continual performance is yet a vehicle of hope, signified by the 'live' action.

This third of Foreman's productions to include film exhibits both this tragic sense and this adamant hope, and demonstrates that mediated understanding is a powerful vehicle for cultural and performative encounter.