

I dream of God's felt sense

Hermeneutic Circular, April 2023, pp. 6-8

*

It's frightening, life.
Paul Cézanne

Few mythical figures seem more benign than the Magi, the three Kings of nativity plays. Guided by a portent in the sky, they bring gifts to the divine child. What miracle were they hoping to find? The prevailing version, all wonder and jubilation, gives the birth as the astonishing event. In his 1914 poem *The Magi*, W.B. Yeats disagrees:

*Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.*

In this version the Magi are disappointed by the everyday scene. Their thirst for turbulence remains unsatisfied. For a moment, they doubt what they had faintly foreseen: some other scene, elsewhere, outside the walls of Jerusalem: the 'turbulence of Calvary', the darkening of the sky, the earthquake at the moment of the death of a young man nailed to a cross. *And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth shook, the rocks broke*, the chronicler Matthew said, before adding sensationally: *the sepulchres opened and many bodies of dead saints resurrected.*

A few moments before (this Matthew does not say), the kiss on Mary Magdalene's lips; the promise *I will be King, and you will be Queen, and you will have power over demons*, whispered by the condemned amid insults and shouts and the bets of a crowd forever craving diversions. His jaw tightened in horror, the innocent victim shudders. The joints of his lean, desirable body explode; blood oozes from his wounds; his pale lips part to reveal a bloodied tongue and bloodied teeth.

*

This is the end of our elaborate plans.
Jim Morrison

I too would have once said that the Magi came from afar to honour the miracle of birth – of every birth. Now I want to say that every human birth results in a new human death. That sex, reproductive or not, reveals to us that we are going nowhere. That all those future rendezvous slotted in our diaries are uncertain, all our promises unrealistic. Reproductive sex in particular is a dead end, guiltily disjoined from pleasure in many a pious cock-and-bull story, adding emphasis to the awful insight: we are going nowhere *fast*. Turbo-teleology with a conked-out *telos*. Existence is groundless; that's what makes human sexuality possible. The death drive often overrides the desire for more life, but the desire to die is one with sexual desire. The 'bad breast' of Kleinian lore is the sexual breast.

*

My dear mother left me when I was quite young
She said, 'Lord have mercy on my wicked son'.
Canned Heat

The Magi want to uncover a different mystery. They are *hoping to find once more, /Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied, /The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor*. A menacing prospect. They long for another cataclysm, as if the existential cry of *lama sabachthani* ('why have you forsaken me?') uttered by a young man on the cross (the cry that seals the end of every human life) weren't enough. As if the inevitable demise, the ominous spell cast and spelled out in every blues song weren't enough.

Good news is no news, and the Magi are hungry for news. Not unlike those of us who doze off in the warmth of a living room to the reassuring buzz of the television showing pictures of schools and hospitals blown up by missiles, or are distracted by the torrent of horrific, instantly commodified announcements on social media – dull ricochets of distant calamities, invasions, warfare – all of them diversions from the anxious gratifications of a family dinner. 'The Magi are our frozen thoughts – writes Michael Wood in *Yeats and Violence* – our cold and continuing appetite for the disruption of human appetite'. Will the Magi be satisfied by a future catastrophe? Will they *ever* be satisfied? Or are they the personification of dissatisfaction itself, not dissimilar from our own very modern craving for news? If this

premise is adequate, if the Magi *are* the personification of our chronic dissatisfaction, they begin to appear in a different light: from mild grandfatherly sages of Christian myth, they edge alarmingly close to the Furies of ancient Greek tragedy. They too are called ‘the benevolent ones’ or ‘gracious ones’ (*Eumenides*), even though their merciless pursuit of Oreste, the latest individual caught in the blood-spattered transgenerational chain coursing through the House of Atreus, is far from gracious.

The Eumenides, the last play of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy, charts the advent of the Athenian rule of law. Thanks to Athena’s intervention, The Furies’ ferocity and vengefulness are finally tamed, rerouted into the ways of legal justice. We are expected to think that this event signals the end of revenge and the beginning of fairness. A comforting notion, unsettled by the parallel recognition implied in Aeschylus that the law is steeped in violence, that the tutelary deities of the justice system are chthonic blood-thirsty Furies. Walter Benjamin famously wrote of *Rechtsgewalt*, the violence of the law itself, in 1921. Decades later, Hannah Arendt will speak of ‘state-owned means of violence’. Roland Barthes will similarly write of the ‘violence of the law, of laws, of the police, of the state’ which he refers to as ‘dry, polite’.

The Magi crave the unmanageable – the excess of violence enveloping the everyday, echoed by our own voyeurism in the face of horror, our anticipation of the coming-into-being of an endlessly deferred apocalypse played out in our hunger for news.

News can only be violent because only violence makes the news.

*

Milia rumorum confusaque verba volutant.
Ovid

It is convenient to think of our collective craving for (bad) news as the result of the venomous hullabaloo set by the tabloids. But where does the gutter press draw from if not our own (alienated, colonized) everyday? Where does sensationalism originate if not in the nameless streets forever flowing with gossip and backbiting? In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Rumour (*Fama*) dwells on a rock and from a myriad crevices rocks and throbs sending back the fleeting echoes of hearsay. A place without peace, without silence, plagued by a noise like rustling sea waves in the distance or the rumble just before thunder. The incessant to and fro of nasty and giddy blabbermouths, unwavering and insatiable in their piercing politeness. One or two honest news reports blended with hundred allegations and brash, idiotic bulletins. With each rebound, with every added shred of frill and hideous slander the itching grows, and the

shameless slurs. Rumour, Ovid concludes, sees it all, in heaven, sea and land, and puts the whole world on trial.

*

To know the dark, go dark.
Wendell Berry

When the anonymity, banality, and boredom of everyday life are transcribed and propagated, when they turn into propaganda, they are invested with an aura of desublimated, abject drama. Everything then turns into announcement, denouncement – everything turns into *image*.

There may be moments of respite from all-embracing tedium: flashes of clarity, the Heideggerian ‘clearing’ (*Lichtung*, both material space and ‘field of consciousness’). A secular miracle perhaps, confirming our hunger for rupture, for the irruption of the extraordinary into the folds of the ordinary. Betraying our fear of ordinariness, of inevitable boredom as pure sign of the everyday advancing to the foreground. Besides, is not rapture itself – mystical, secular, aesthetic, sensuous – a form of violence?

Boredom is the antidote, a meditator’s true expertise. You wait and wait for the so-called miracle, while common miracles pass you by. A Zen dialogue:

When Mu-chou was asked, "We dress and eat every day; how do we transcend the everyday, having to put on clothes and eat food?"

Mu-chou answered, "We dress; we eat."

"I don't understand," said the monk.

"If you don't understand, put on your clothes and eat your food".

*

*And as artists and children play, so plays the ever-living fire,
building up and destroying, in innocence.*
Friedrich Nietzsche

The street is also the *outside*, a domain, alongside ‘nature’, seldom if ever apprehended, sovereignly indifferent to human subjectivity. Even the ‘greatest of French phenomenologists’ Merleau-Ponty, writing about Cézanne, ends up saying *le paysage se pense en moi*, ‘the landscape thinks itself in me’ – a luminous statement which nevertheless replicates the

sentimentality of an undisputed subjectivity high on sightseeing. It makes no difference whether the object in question is a landscape or the experiential domain of therapy. What could the alternative be to 'the landscape thinks itself in me'? T.J. Clark's suggestion: 'the landscape un-thinks me in *it*'.

A scoop of water taken from the river to a lab for study is no longer rivering. Artists at times come close to sensing the outside's breath-taking verve. Themselves rivering, they step-and-not-step not-even-once into the river. Nietzsche startles us with the meandering curve of his thought. Open any of his books at random, Gilles Deleuze tells us in a tender tribute to the nomadic philosopher. You will find that thought does not spring from or is reduced to an atomized consciousness. You will also find the philosophical tradition (existential phenomenology included) nonchalantly pulverized. *Hooking up thought to the outside* – Deleuze goes on to say – *is, strictly speaking, something philosophers have never done, even when they were talking about politics, even when they were talking about taking a walk or fresh air.*

I dream of fresh air spilling into the clinic, of the morning light flooding the room. I dream of a gust of wind, the rustle of two white pigeons on the windowsill one December afternoon. Not the abstract 'world' of phenomenologists. Not even the concrete otherness of the other across the room. I dream of God's own felt sense of this everyday day.

*

Manu is a psychotherapist/supervisor. He will run a monthly course/training with guest tutors from September 2023 to June 2024 titled *The Primacy of Affect: An Introduction to Affect-based Therapy, Supervision, and Research*. Email: manubazzano3@gmail.com