

5.

SOMEONE WRITING

["Celui qui écrit," Espèce de chose mélancolie (1979)]

The essay translated here, "Someone Writing," and the one translated in Chapter 6, "Roland Barthes," both express Schefer's peculiar concern for the difficult place and indeed the difficult experience of the practice writing. Writing is understood here as a privileged operation of the tension between the doxical and paradoxical bodies--between the registration, that is, of science and knowledge on the one hand, and the practice of memory on the other. The subject of memory is always posed in a relation of difficulty in terms of the operations and protocols of all doxical knowledge. Knowledge, understood in that sense, always insisting upon what Schefer calls the anthropological subject, can do no more than "throw a bridge" between the two bodies (we've seen in Chapter 4 Schefer's fascination with the priestly role of the pontifex--the one who makes a bridge); on the other hand, it's the function of writing to register the actual experience of the paradoxical body, to experiment upon it and be experimented upon by it.

"Someone Writing" takes a moment from André Gide's diaries which records his dream of Paul Valéry's dying. The death-bed scenario is given over to the difficulties of Gide's oneiric transcribing of Valéry's last words. Schefer takes the tripartite structure of the scenario--there is in his reading someone talking, someone listening, and someone writing--and offers it as a moment that exhibits the unstable relation of memory and the body, as well as the peculiar tasks given to writing in that relation. What is important here is not so much the recovery of the paradoxical body but rather the laying out of those unstable relations. Thus Schefer turns the dream into a kind of figure of those relations--an anamorphosis indeed--or an attempt to register, in excess of the scene's actual figuration, the presence of the enigmatic body and its relation to death.

One point of reference along the way here is Freud's account of the dream and of the "situation" of the dream (see "Spilt Colour/Blur"). While Schefer's disagreement with Freud and with his metapsychology is often hinted at, it has never been developed into a thoroughgoing critique. Nonetheless the presence of this disagreement in much of Schefer's work can perhaps point up some of the essentials of Schefer's own thinking. One fundamental objection to the Freudian account is that it does not go beyond the allegorical; the dream is the discourse of Freud's "other scene," attempting like all allegory to throw a bridge between the experiential body and its paradoxical body, but succeeding finally only in marking the "laceration" of the human species. Another and related objection is the "scenic" presumption of Freud's account that the dream is a "scene"; this Schefer dismisses, reckoning that the scenic is always cut through by the Christian ideology we have mentioned and in the ways we have seen. Indeed, when Freud offers a triplex libido (ego, id, super-ego), Schefer considers this as a theoretical form filling the same experiential gaps and aporias as Augustine's Trinity--it's a theoretical formula that allegorically stands in for the paradoxical body and for memory by constructing a scene for them in the theatre of figuration.

What Schefer is looking for instead is more exactly what he has called a skiagraphy--etymologically, a writing of the split or the division of the subject between the living body and the body of memory. In a sense Schefer is on the track of something we might see as unsophisticated, something primitive, or even primal--the kind of "childish" knowledge that in Chapter 6 he says he finds at certain moments in Barthes's writing. For him Barthes produces a writing that recognizes itself as the necessary place for the registration of a distance from the lure of the anthropological subject or the subject of knowledge. This is the lesson of Barthes's last work which, suitably enough for Schefer's purposes, happen to have been on the subject of the image--on photography. Schefer's obituary here for his friend and teacher, who died in 19 , has seemed ungenerous to some readers, but it might just as easily be understood as a kind of

alternative rendering of the anamorphosis that "Someone Writing" constitutes: rather than a death that is dreamed, it movingly registers Roland Barthes's real death in terms of his lifelong practice of writing.

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The Scriptures tell us that there are two men in any man: "For in as much as the external man is destroyed, the internal man renews himself every day;" and "I delight in God's law after the internal man"...Some believe that it is simply by way of repetition that in Genesis, after the account of the creation of man, we learn: "God took a clod of earth and fashioned man." Such an interpretation would suggest that man's being after His image is his body, and that God has human form, or that His form is something of that sort. For our part, we are not so foolish as to suppose that God is composed of an inferior and a superior element, to one of which our being after His image corresponds; nor to suppose that so far as the image of God is concerned our being after His image is entirely constituted in the inferior rather than in the superior element" (Origen).¹

Or rather--in what can this "being after His image" consist for someone writing? Origen's passage comes down to this: quite apart from what it says, it remains horribly attached to one of the strangest moments of my own life, something that even distance can't help me express. Something, equally, that can't be taken up into a drama.

But akin to that is the following bizarre antecedence of death that André Gide described (September 17th 1936) in the form of a body indefeasibly given over to someone else's writing or to someone else's voice. The curtain opens onto an uncharted stage: in Gide, Paul Valéry can subsist only through the agency of someone else's writing. This is the opening of what could only be an allegorical scene, extremely difficult in its content:

I had a strange dream from which I awakened just as it was turning

into a nightmare, and this is what allows me to recall it. I was in a room in which Paul Valéry, in bed, was dictating as Milton used to dictate. It was clear that he was very ill, too ill to write for himself. In a corner of the room someone, who might well have been Claude Valéry, was taking dictation; or at least, he was supposed to be writing; but when I looked at him he was busy nonchalantly sharpening his pencil, while Valéry continued to utter sentences the importance of which came partly from the fact that they would perhaps be his last. And I felt fall upon me, like a command, the urgent obligation to make up for the secretary's default. I took out my fountain pen and on a sheet of notebook paper that happened to be in my hand I began to write. But there begins the nightmare. Valéry's pronunciation was more indistinct than ever; there were words that I heard, or understood, badly; and that I did not dare ask him to repeat, in view of his great weakness.

I had already covered half a page as best I could, and if I had awakened earlier, I should have remembered other sentences; each one in turn seemed to me of great importance, sublime. I recall only the last one, which, having awakened, as I say, I felt the need of noting at once. Here it is: "Just an Ah! ago, we were literary clocks." I had interrupted him, not understanding very well and not daring to ask him what that meant. I found it more expedient to ask him how Ah! should be written. He replied at once, and with some impatience: "It doesn't matter--a or Ah!..;" and I then understand that he was expressing a period of time. That meant: the time

required to say a or Ah! As for the rest, I wrote it on trust, but wondered whether he had said clock (pendule), or hung (pendu), or lost (perdu). It was, in any case, admirable.²

This opening could also be the opening of a sudden or anticipated memory of the dictation: or a dream incessantly begun by the wakening of a muffled dictation. Gide waking up within his own dream, a whole to-and-fro movement on that paradoxical filmy surface--and also waking up within someone else's sleep, someone who's dictating in a muffled voice: dictating his last words, totally at the mercy of an uncertainty in the spelling, and thence in the meaning. So he's trapped in a kind of vacillation: he doesn't know the ultimate essence of what he's writing. Here the dream is not quite a stage: more like a drop of oil dripping from the uncertainty of the object, of its moment, of the incalculable weight of something suggested by this sort of bedside stenography. Ever increasing circles; the reservoir of writing, this hurried inscription no longer holds anything, always nothing, not even a monster. The bulk of the recumbent figure lies back, supported on an elbow, annoyed, with a voice that becomes more and more hollow, more and more inaudible, attached simply to the gravity of his imminent death. Invents nothing; reaches beyond that distress that has always eluded expression (and that was always the great task of his writing, its most pressing business), beyond the final threshold of a sort of indifference between whatever it is that can be written straight from the mouth, at the bedside, and far from the head, and whatever it is that can be spoken or written as a counterbalance to the muffled and weighty death of the speaking body; he reaches then, in the form of a dream (the only representation permitted outside of the social body's day), reaches the threshold of difference between this chain of heavy words (improbable and undecidable) and the consistent nothing at which they arrive after their transcription.

The stirring, inside the dream, of an act of writing in the shape of its own inability to understand the sigh as anything but an unfamiliar word. Valéry's last sigh. He doesn't understand death except as a clock that just records innumerable quantities of time, themselves in a taut oscillation. The dream presents or writes something that's not approachable, the imagining of time as a shadow beating against a weakened body--tensing itself to restate or invent just this pendulum and in the most uncertain terms.

The tension of an entire life in this almost final a, or Ah!

What music is written by the hand, by the heart, by the head?

Something insists--and heavily--that it be written, but only through the death of music.

This scene--a mixing together of all the disproportions between writing, hearing, dictation, muffled speaking--adds the quantity of a dream to this place where it has never been, this scene that cannot be figured. Only half-spoken in a new place, and not in an imagined space. Da Vinci's dream:

del sognare: men shall walk without moving, they shall speak with those who are absent, they shall hear those who do not speak.

del ombra che si muova coll'uomo: There shall be seen shapes and figures of men and animals which shall pursue these men wheresoever they flee; and the movement of the one shall be as those of the other, but it shall seem a thing to wonder at because of the different dimensions which they assume.³

The body lives and subsists only in a paradox. A motor going backwards in time, a motor unhindered by space.

So no stage. The function (but not the figuration) of dreams is to empty the present from every possible--that is, every repeatable--figuration. This is not the opening

of a theatrical scene. Here everything is exactly this--an instability which is our species, a slipperiness (but not a sliding away of content); here it's the future that works on the impossibility of any "situation" like a past that hasn't yet come about (the present of this dream, propped up but without a discourse, is thus the future of some past that hasn't yet come about). The Freudian scene, like any visionary dream, is contradicted every night. The rationality of the "other scene" is denied by its own reality.

Knowledge remains allegorical--speaking allegorically of time, and of the era preceding the construction of dogmas. The allegorical body is attached, not to a place, nor to the imagination of a place, but to a language and to this reversal of time that occurs, as language, within a tension of meaning. Meaning prior to any scenic imaginary. Science (or the first anthropology) has always tried to construct a bridge between these two bodies that are neither ever contemporaneous nor ever mutually infeasible. The allegorical experience isn't an experience of their union but of the laceration that constitutes the very sign of our species.

With these three representatives, these three pressures scattered around the room--the one who dreams, the one speaking, and the one telling the story (who plays the role of the one who had been supposed to do the transcribing)--it's a question of different positions being gathered up into the body of an anamorphosis; the three can have no possible unity. If there's something in Gide that can write them all down, it's the opening of this totally impossible theatre, a theatre that has no stage since its only aim is to place a sign over the time that has to be given only to be discharged; or it must be given in order to provoke the arrival in similar dreamlike quantity, in a measureless quantity (unaccountable by its own insistence and by the obstinacy that's proper to dreams as they wear down figuration), provoke the arrival of latent man.

Cold, dark bedside, an invisible elbow, unaided by light or shade, supporting a

voice that's beyond its own words. The throat's emission passes onto a murky pad that writes down just a strangled sigh or a mathematical sign that carries it all away--and the figureless duration of this body is set in motion once more while it pronounces upon the constant hesitation in which (according to Gide) death must be inscribed. Back again to the movement of a clock. Insubstantial shadow, spindle that cannot write; striking in between the duration of a muffled cry and a letter detached from the alphabet, an algebraic curve. So the dream writes down the irritation of the shapeless hesitation that nonetheless shapes our species through time, and transcribes it with an impotent hand. A sigh that has fallen from the alphabet, since it's no longer a shape--nor even so insubstantial as it might be--the duration of a body that's future, but only latent in a recumbent letter. The clock that we might have been (hung or lost) strikes only on the face of two disjunct languages for an a of time. Two languages, both of which it weakens, capturing the impossible body in their uncertain echo so as to articulate that body, put it together, all at the same time.

A barely distorted anamorphosis: the backward movement (the metronomic moment) within the impossible or infeasible body of Monsieur Teste (someone who only survived in quarter hours of incalculable writing, Valéry said). Someone who composed these three characters together on a face that was written without a shape: voice, hearing, and deafness.

So there subsists here, as a striated or crosshatched face, the very thing that Leonardo allowed to hang outside of every imagination of time--a third aspect of a character, of a scene, of theatre, of figuration. Shadow.

Imagination of the furthest body (or residence), but also its opposite--a body without a home that would just gravitate without chiming, without moving in phases, perhaps without moving at all. It's this--the weight of a body removed from its own

imagination. Black, shadowy--at any rate the weight of what cuts it off--the face on which it must turn to be born and to escape from its image. Up or down? more like an anatomy of limbs that's of uncertain cut and that's only ever an intermediary. An intermediary to its own future (its own arrival)--I stress, the effect of the absence of light.

We might say, "latent to its own sun."

A whole, terrible blindfold placed lovingly upon the unknown species that wakes me each night. To witness its dream or its death. Cut off or endless.

A mass that's released before it can be reached by the death of a pale body.

(I cannot stay with you for very long, nor, I'm sure, for very far. I'm on watch. For what, I don't know. Or I know only too well. A sort of promontory. Sentry to a language that doesn't exist but that causes moments of terror and passion to last within me.) The fear that a hand might come and touch or feel, traverse an anatomy so imprecise as this one, turned towards a face, darkly, and jealous of a future. Of a future that doesn't threaten it. Not so secure as that. Remains far from where this hand can carry. A face at first unhidden but turned away toward the prospect of its birth. Separated thus from a death that's inadequate; hoping for an intermediary: it's a subsisting gap that can never be joined again.

Begins to know this fateful, black metal in the credit balance of the entire species, and of which only a small sum would be negotiable: piles up at precisely the point where an animal would unwillingly be cut in two for the sake of a stage spectacle. A kind of laminated soul that subsists anterior to any movement that would cut a body in two.

So it is that in Leonardo a dreamlike quantity of something invincible is attached to the work of shadow. There are three people locked in a room where a voice is

dictating: a clock, a little bit of time, the sigh connected to that bit of time, and the further sigh of noting it down in the form of an italic a. Pent up pressures, each unable to write, speak, or hear. And their union isn't the working of pressures upon a single being. They're not embodied. In this desire of time there's a triplex libido within a single room, always locked up there because this impossible time, this time impossibly discharged from the present, is busy making monsters that are linked to a spelling problem: monsters who, for this duration of time that cannot find its inscription, struggle with time itself as its triple consciousness.

The shadows in this room, displaced onto the banks of a river, made da Vinci write the following little scenario in which bodies don't add up ("Of the shadow cast by the sun and of the reflection in the water seen at one and the same time"). In da Vinci there's a written man--a novelistic body, unravelled by the sight and the experience of its own paradox, and now entertained only because of the rupture that it causes in the fiction of perspective: "Many times one man shall be seen to change into three and all shall proceed together, and often the one that is most real abandons him"--Vedrassi molte volte l'uno uomo diuentare 3, e tutti lo seguono, e spesso l'uno, il piu certo, l'abandona.

NOTES

¹ Origen, Dialogue with Heraclides [Entretien d'Origène avec Héraclide et les évêques ses collègues, sur le père, le fils, et l'âme]. Edité par Jean Scherer. Cairo: Publications de la société fouad de papyrologie (1949), 146-9]

² Translation taken, with slight changes, from The Journals of André Gide: 1928-1939 (tr. Justin O'Brien). New York: Knopf (1949), 348-9.

³ This and subsequent quotations from Leonardo da Vinci, Notebooks, 2: 504