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A Death in Progress

Suicide, according to Lacan, is the one successful act of which we are capable. This paper – an attempt to give form to that phenomenon, the force of impact, the image you leave when you hit the ground, the – is not a success. I suspect that the attempt to figure suicide will always involve some sort of redemptive motif. That is, it will fail. So instead, I have decided to present what I have written backwards, and so make it truly redemptive.

What I have written: a description of progress this year on *The 14th Floor*, my scientific experimental novel, the Hegelian social theory underwriting it, the philosophy of time contouring its floors and walls, the opera libretto into which it collapsed, the abandoning of the novel, then the opera, and at last this very paper itself, a crumpled heap of loss, memories and nothing (the logic of modernity, I suggest, is predicated upon the periodic urge to absent oneself from it. One's character is just this absencing. Unto death). Now read backwards.

The final paragraph

A tear in the page as a knife slices as it cuts an eye out of an empty canvas face.
Like cutting the I out of my own body. of work. A saintly angel's halo above.
An iconostasis, in red nail-polish and heavy mascara. All saintly, with oil brush

in hand. Painting the icon of its own death. But an image can't image its own absence.

Second last paragraph.

The 14th Floor is written in blood and cigarettes because I am trying to find an image (some materialisation, words on a page, a bleeding lung, smoke rings, dates of birth and death, names) among the ashes, all scattered to the wind, an image for whatever it is within me that needs to turn to ashes on the hour, every hour, all scattered to the wind.

Third last paragraph.

into a ruin in ruins, a film script and the play, which I planned to set, alongside the opera, as a triptych within the "homogenous, empty" and anonymous world of *The 14th Floor*. Now I just have a novel with a gaping hole in it, a nightmare in Hegel's lungs, themselves steadily collapsing, under the weight of the past is it the future the future perfect the image you leave when you the ground the thirteenth

Fourth last paragraph

Let me reframe this project, putting walls back in place, a roof, windows, a door, a fourteenth floor not dissimilar to hundreds of others across a city like Sydney or Melbourne, or both. This report, which has taken the form of a collapsing edifice, a suffocating lung, or even a pavement rushing to meet the one who leaps, figures the style of the novel itself: varying discourses, philosophical, academic, literary and operatic, pushed to the point of impossibility and/or collapse. In fact this paper is part of the work. There is no novel. Just words around it. Literary and philosophical discourse like the white lines they drew around a no longer breathing body not far from here in Ultimo. The lines remained after they had

moved it to the morgue, chalk lines around an absent body, a street side cenotaph, just as soon washed away by the rain.

5th.

Let me rip off the roof here. With another cigarette. An image of a lung. Blood spattered. Breathe in. Don't – The third reason *The 14th Floor* is written for real is that it keeps returning to a missing body, my own “deeply desired flesh.” To explain what I mean I need to call upon Lacan's definition of the real as trauma, the violence of impact. But even this is too metaphoric. The opera couldn't capture it either, you can't catch the desire to leap, to go up in flames, to shatter your own mirror, I tore it up, it collapsed.

6th.

A cosmetically ornate orchestra, suturing over with strings, drums and low basses hints as to the horror which their wedding will betoken. The truth of the imagined community (for the opera is as much a product of *The 14th Floor* as *The 14th Floor* itself) is to burst forth in this archaic *ur*-image, a shattered mirror reflection of the modern. All in ruins, assailed on all sides, subject to wailing, mass murder, houses burning. The ruins, in this dramatisation of the recent past, leap out of their picture postcard frame to become none other than the ruins of the present. With no –

7th.

Let me tear down a wall here. Tear down a wall and you get a stage. Tear a stage into *The 14th Floor* and you get an opera. The more I have worked on this novel, constructing the fourteen flights-up floorplan, finding characters in this particular context, listening to what they said, the more I have realised that the unbearable self-sameness of the “I that is We” world (Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977,

p.110), where Spit is defined as “this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’”) that I have confined myself to necessitates, like a logical inference, that I stage a diversion within it. Something for the characters in the novel to do when they are not working as characters in the novel. Something to look forward to. Death. Something to stop them obsessing, like good Hegelian subjects, on their own reflections. Mirrors demand to be shattered. Neither Hegel nor Anderson really has a handle on this. Yet I believe that this experimentally generated result indicates something about the function of diversion within the modern, within *The 14th Floor*, within this paper. My doctoral investigations have accordingly collapsed into *The Destruction of*, a nineteenth century opera, with –

8th.

exemplifies this state of concrete abstraction. As does the modern novel, for it shows “the ‘national imagination’ at work in the movement of a solitary hero” through an endlessly comparable and coeval “world of plurals.” The “hospitals, prisons, remote villages, monasteries” through which the narrator passes conjure up “a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside” (p.30). Imagining a community of others passing horizontally through similar fourteenth floor spaces, the modern subject writes his and/or her own book, a nation-as-novel, connecting each character with all the other anonymously co-altitudinal characters, thus united in the “homogenous, empty time” of the secular present. “Nothing assures us,” Anderson continues, “of this sociological solidity more than the succession of plurals. For they conjure up a social space full of *comparable* prisons, none –

Let me open a door here – and this stupid experiment. I’ve timed giving up smoking with the writing of this paper so that whatever it is within me that needs to turn to ashes on the hour every hour might take form on this paper instead. An image of a lung. Blood spattered. The saints in Heaven,

wrote Richard of Middleton, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, for they seek to be reunited “with their own deeply desired flesh.” – Let me open a door here.

in itself of any importance, but all representative (in their simultaneous, separate existence) of the oppressiveness of *this* colony” (p.30). This abstract imagining somehow serves to hold the modern – in the absence of Heaven and Hell – together. Indeed affections more typical of the particular, the religious, familial or even maternal are transferred to the national body, whose hold displays such “remarkable confidence of community in anonymity” (p.36). You will perhaps notice, at this stage in the experimental genesis of the nation-as-novel, that its characters have no character. And no future.

9th.

The second reason *The 14th Floor* is written for real is that modern society is itself a fiction. Such is the conclusion of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991). The characters I experimentally generated above can now take their place within a wider social framework. For the “generic conventions” of the novel are those of modernity itself. A social scientist, Anderson reasons as follows: the nation-as-novel arises, first and foremost, from the chronological structure of modernity itself. Unlike the medieval era, where my time span on Earth might race forward to meet the resurrection of my mortal remains on the Day of Judgement, time is now “homogenous and empty,” free of interference, human or divine (Benjamin, 1973, p.263). Time at this moment, exists with or without me, and as such exemplifies –

10th.

Harold Pinter once stated that when creating plays he had typically “found a couple of characters in a particular context, thrown them together and listened to

what they said” (Pinter, 1983, p.xxviii). I want to utilize a similar method, taking the intellectual presuppositions of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) as the “test conditions” for an experimental act of novel writing. According to the *Phenomenology*, it is only by knowing yourself as part of a greater whole that you acquire identity as yourself. From such a standpoint it is almost truer to say that the context (the fourteenth floor of a hospital, a residential block, a university admin. building) generates the character. More accurately, both arise from the experimental application of the same syllogism, *viz*:

minor premise	I live on the fourteenth floor
major premise	All the people who live on the fourteenth floor are characters in this book
conclusion	Therefore I am a character in this book

The Hegelian novel, written through experimental application of “the science of experience” casts up characters with the curious capacity to reflect upon the test-conditions, or generic conventions, in which they are produced. In fact, they are all authors. Hegel would term this self-consciousness and see it as a prerequisite for existence in civil society. You will perhaps notice, at this stage in the experimental genesis of the Hegelian novel, that its characters have no character. And no future.

11th.

The *14th Floor* is written for real for a number of reasons, first among them its status as a literary/scientific experiment. The word *experiment* was initially synonymous with the word *experience*, as their joint derivation from the Latin *experiri* indicates. The scientific experiment is based upon the scientist’s experience of phenomena produced, or even staged, within certain test conditions. The future is radically disavowed, for the point is simply to observe what happens right before one’s eyes, which is to say, the point is to find a semiotic form for the phenomena at hand. Substitute “generic conventions” for “test conditions” in the

above formulation and it is possible to view experimental writing through a similarly scientific aesthetic.

12th.

Yet theological discourse has no place in this world. It has no place in this world because it concerns the future, whereas the present is the only time we can ever experience. To take Hegel's claim seriously, one has to admit of everything that happens, has happened or will happen, that it occurred, has occurred or will occur, in the present. Not that this makes the immediacy of concrete experience that easy to attain. On the contrary, the necessary foundation of symbols and structures suspends this present in a strange sort of never quite there space of abstract immediacy. This is what I am calling *The 14th Floor*.

14th

Breathe in. We are back on *The 14th Floor*, a hi-rise novel set in the "homogenous empty time" of the secular present, in accord with Hegel's dictum that "reflection...is actual only in the present." (1942, p.10). The aim of my experimental novel is to see what happens when a world is constituted by altitude alone.

To this end I am taking a hi-rise cross-section of civic life: a hospital, a residential block, a university admin. building – that

is to say, the fourteenth floors thereof. For there are no ground shots, no parks, no tangible exteriors. Just thin air. And another fourteenth floor. The social ties within this world are horizontal, arbitrary and abstract. The characters form a class defined by the altitude of their existence and that alone. The social landscape this practice constitutes is effectively not dissimilar to any other modern novel. As in Tolstoy, Dickens, or Flaubert, various characters across a city are described in their simultaneous and parallel existences, happenings and

eventual encounters. Only here we are hi-rise and there is rather less space to breathe. Even with the windows open. For the world of my novel, “actual only in the present,” is written for real.

The 13th floor.

I want to start with an image from the end of time: the Day of Judgement. Or rather I want to present a Medieval perspective on this moment, the day when the faithful souls in Heaven will have their bodies restored to them. The corporeality of medieval theology, the insistence that personhood is lodged in the

body as much as the soul, is strikingly apparent in the eschatological texts of divines like Richard of Middleton. Richard claims that sheer bodily desire drives the saints in Heaven to pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. The saints seek to fill the places of the elect in Heaven and so hasten the coming of Judgement, for on that day these disembodied souls will be reunited “with their own deeply desired flesh” (Walker-Bynum, 1991, p. 257). In such texts, Heaven itself is aflame with the desire for a body. A death.

List of references

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

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Caroline Walker-Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Zone Books, 1992).