## A History of Reason

Pierre Guyotat's autobiographical fiction **In the Deep** is a backwards look, from the author's 69th year, at the beginning of a creative vocation. Indeed, the term vocation is not excessive to describe Guyotat's devotion of more than fifty years to inventing the language for a dark horror: the writing of a prostitutional scene where prostitute slaves are bred for the sole purpose of their labor of lust and where all human life has a price.

Over its long development, Guyotat has given this brothel scene many names. He has shifted its setting from the former French colonies in North Africa (Tomb for 500,000 Soldiers or Eden, Eden, Eden) to invented contemporary metropolises (in the recent and as-yet-untranslated Joyeux Animaux de la Misère). Its slave figures have names borrowed from combatants in the struggles against colonialism and post-colonialism (for example, one hero is named Samora Machel after the revolutionary and eventual president of Mozambique who successfully fought Portuguese colonial rule), and are inflected by Guyotat's observations and personal experiences (sexual encounters, men and women seen during his travels, or on the streets). Pictures from the camps of World War II seen in books by the young Guyotat had imprinted their slaughterhouse images of naked and tortured bodies on his mind. But beyond this historical anchoring, the scene breaks with historical boundedness to reach farther and farther through time, coursing man's endless alienation, driving for the "divine slaving infinite," the endless and utmost abandon to need, or control, or power. It concerns the never-satisfied drive to profit (or cum) on the backs of whatever can be exchanged—the human, the animal, the natural. The scene is populated with prostitutes, pimps, procurers and procuresses, slaves and workers; it has its own locale, its twists and turns of (bodily) events and exchanges of fluids and money, its reason, and its own specific language: a Word, an invert of divine speech. It is not predominantly a place of sexuality, but of exchange: its abjection results from the truth that being cannot be sold. "In prostitution or slavery," writes Guyotat, "I am obsessed not as much by domination or obedience, but by gold on the organ (l'or sur l'organe), the commercialization of circuits, of the anatomical and physiological circulations" (Vivre, 63).

Guyotat's vocation is absolutely excessive, in its singularity and strangeness, in its ambitions, its contradictions, and its dangers. In 2007, Guyotat began writing a series of autobiographical fictions, part historical fact, part theoretical, in which he returned to the salient moments of his life inasmuch as they are interwoven with the writing. **Coma** (2006) narrated the degree of exhaustion and despair to which he was driven by the difficulty of his work and its intractable contradiction, a physical coma that coincided with a spiritual crisis, his writing bottoming out as did the exhilaration of the project of collective emancipation that had fueled much of its imaginary through the 1960s and '70s. **Formation** (2007), set during childhood, recounted his family's involvement in the resistance and the reasoned inhumanity of the camps. **In the Deep** returns to the origin of his prostitutional scene, and the seminal practice out of which it sprung.

The specifics here are Guyotat's "beat-sheet" practice: masturbatory writing that he developed at the onset of puberty. Publicly announced to the Parisian TelQuelian intelligentsia assembled at the Artaud-Bataille conference of 1972 as something he had already given up, the beat-sheet has remained surrounded with a slight aura of underground infamy and anti-conventional cool, although very little was known of it. In the Deep explains and maps out its complex implications—physical, imaginary, social, philosophical, and sacred. Guyotat had started masturbating early to ward off announcing to his class that he had to go to the bathroom, to hide the base functions of the body, too shameful for the young, ten-year-old Catholic child. Instead of signaling that need with his hand raised, the child would slip the hand into his short pants, and tug at the little member there, discovering that the spreading warmth released during that knead-

ing was enough to delay the urge until recess or lunch. From the beginning, masturbation was related to a symbolic space, the body clearly tied to a social ordering of needs, with its related system of concealment and delay. This incipient fondling developed an entire logic whose emergence is rigorously charted in the book, from the original stratum of sense data through the child's still inchoate ideas about sexuality and reproduction, under the sign of Catholic notions of God, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, truth, and beauty, as well as class-based French cultural frames around gender, politics, purpose, work, desire, and love. Later, masturbation developed in the spaces of intimacy available for a more in-depth exploration of the act, where the boy might deal with its unsavory production: a sulfurous, maybe even poisonous white substance, the fear of its corrosive power forgotten in the pleasure of its discharge. In Guyotat's boarding school, the outside latrines provided the only opportunity for solitude. Still linked with defecation, often occurring at the same time, masturbation in the latrines began to be accompanied with an imaginary space, and the physical sensations connected into a mingled sensorium with adjoining intellectual and emotional facets.

Slowly, the beat off practice grew, developed, came to fruition, and dug its imaginary space, internally, into a low, inner depths of desire and language called the deep ("arrière-fond"). Guyotat invented an apparatus for writing where masturbation and language joined in a technique—replete with costume to be strapped on—an experimentation of desire at the borderline of cuming with an economics of ejaculation and restraint aiming to produce the thickest, lewdest clots of Word to scribble with a trembling hand on the paper beside and under the hot substance. Its jizz cloth shared its name with the trappings of the clergy. For the adolescent Guyotat, this deep was shameful, raw, against morality: it was the underbelly of the social, an inverted double of the self. But its implications, even if seen here through the eyes of an adolescent, had a larger portent. "Beating off jerks the head 'til brain empties of all sapiens thought" wrote Guyotat in **Prostitution** (1975). He wanted to write free of the law of lack, and for that, he had to make matter itself write.

The first castration that had to go was the partition between wrong and right knowledge. Everything was fodder for material production. Knowledge (of all kinds, clear or obscure, true or false) met physical fondling to produce feelings, perceptions, and rationalizations. The young Guyotat called facts what some who are more rigorously empirical would relegate to religious doctrine, social convention, received ideas about genders, sexes, physical organs. Here is the list of facts that he develops in the book, a blend of physical sensations, imaginings, and rationalizations: "a Creator God, a Redemptive God, Virgins, paternal conflict, maternal friendship before my mother would disappear three years after this narrative, the Cosmos, History, girls, women, boys, girls again, Nature, animals, the ruins of war, the circus, and especially, through Poetry, the sex organs of women" (In the Deep). The book is written from Guyotat's contemporary perspective, but its voice is that of the fifteen-year-old child who leaves for England, at his first rupture from the law of the father, for a month-long trip that will delay his night practice of the beat-sheet and its entire apparatus of strapping, constraining, and churning of the member to produce a Word that would be on the level of the sacrilege that (for the child at least) the practice demanded.

This physical production instilled a way to think about truth, and its history, in a perhaps lewder version of Foucault's episteme: a shifting, twisting core of reason nonetheless territorialized. "Even in what is the most sacred of the Sacred, truth moves as the Earth turns on itself: this might be where the artist works, in the perpetually disjointed gap which is also maybe the demon's part, at least in the history of humanity" (**In the Deep**).

That rotating core is the place of fiction: where imagination and body create a thick, joyous, deep Word that is the language of

life's incessant drive and of the enslavement to feed it, the language of bodies partaking of the physical labor of production. But theirs is a labor of sexuality without reproduction, without regard for anything other than itself, rigorous beyond violence, an exploded reason.

There is a political logic to the *deep*: no women, because they have been too used and abused in history for this, and none of the classical subjects of exploitation, indigenous peoples, the global colonized. Instead, the children of the powerful are led to the brothel, the prostitutes are almost all masculine, bred for the purpose, their entire lives given over to the destiny of laying beneath the human—what we reserve for animals: absolute *abandon*.

From a material base, using the means available—organs, hands, but also the entire arsenal of the symbolic with its share of misapprehensions—Guyotat writes a material origin of humanity, and of human production and thought. It is a writing of immanence, the textual, sonic, and ritual productivity of the physical body showing how the *non*significant, and then, via the usual (Western) slippage, the *in*significant or base (the base organs) can balloon into the mysterious and the grandiose. Its long, swelling sentences patiently describe the development of reason from a physical base, building up rhythm. But because Guyotat's reason is an extremist and essentialist organ, it is always tottering on the brink of its self-doubt, and its exhaustion through that doubt. What does it mean that art is constructed altogether from wanderings and error? From the Latin *errare* comes erring and error, which so easily tilt into sin.

For the child Guyotat, this masturbatory origin blended pleasure with the forbidden, the unknown, the hidden, and the shameful in an illicit act of writing that represented an attempt at absolute transgression, with its correlative moral outrage and the despair that followed once the deed was done. From this early wrenching apart came a vocation for writing that would embody the contradictions of aesthetics through the 20th century: quickly stated, the coexistence of Richard Wagner with the death camps of World War II, the dark side of modernity and humanism, slavery conjoined with the universal rights of man. Born the year of France's surrender to Germany, Guyotat's life is intimately paired to this history, and his art (he refuses to call it work) struggles with its dark horror, with what beauty or reason lies in a beyond of good and evil where it seems the sacred lurks.

What does the vocational aspect of the work imply? First, the project clearly engages with the history of art as sacred practice. At seminary school, young Guyotat had first conceived of a priestly vocation in the "exhilaration of the continuous celebration of God": light, calm, revelation, joy, a blinding light behind which the child sensed incomprehensible excess. "As a child, the sacred—what isn't sacred for me then?—dazzles me so much that my small reason sees and suspects that there is excess there, and that behind the amazement—object, figure, notion—lies its opposite: behind the absolute of virtue, the absolute of its opposite" (In the Deep). When the calling shifted to art (first painting, then writing) this only made the transgression at its base more pronounced, and gave it grounds in what the child knew from religious instruction, where he sensed that the partition between good and evil was not so clear and started probing their intimate concatenation. If the *deep* is composed of figures, they must be known. Guyotat names "art" the process of that knowing, a becoming other, a refusal to partition self and other, a training in a shared sensorium. Who is the other here? The oppressed, the weak (Catholicism again). It is the other of reason as well: the idiot, the body. And the political other: of patriarchy, of colonial invasion, of class. Writing would respond to the physical need to rid one's self into the other. "Jouir [to come] is then, and is still now, a word that doesn't resonate in my heart, my mind or in my senses. I want more: pleasure without flesh, happiness. In jouir there is the I that encloses the word around the personal orgasm that is nothing" (In the Deep). The vocation of the beat-sheet promises a paradoxical release, emphatically joining with the idiot, the child, the criminal, the violent, the proletariat, the animal, the female, the social outcast, and all the others through contact with blood, shit, garbage, sperm-encrusted rags. The meaning of art as vocation is also the hope of the invention of a life, a singularity: its arc, its meaning, low lows, almost unbearable intensities. The implications are absolute surrender to what one must become and, in that sense, the darkness of the lowermost depths looms as the inevitable that must be imagined, experienced, lived through, and even welcomed.

The body of text that results is a life written through (and maybe also despite) a negative process of excavation, as if Guyotat were trying to extract all cruelty, all sexuality from himself, and to lay it bare, outside, in its own beautiful and pulsating Word. From the Judeo-Catholic tradition the implications are clear. "Immediately his word became accomplished fact." But here, rather than the divine word of God parsing reality and creating fact, Guyotat's brothel word operates according to a form of inversion and reversal. The evil and horror that are in the world, and history as the long space-time of oppression, are seemingly extracted from the self, via imagination and through physical means. But the self also comes to itself and to its own singularity through this inversion, becoming progressively emptied of its violence, as if emptied of what separates it as an *individuated* self.

Why banish sexuality? Why is sexuality entwined in such a profound contract with violence and exploitation? "Everything I do," Guyotat says in an interview, "I do it to rid myself of sexuality; I don't want it, I want to evacuate it; that will take the time it will take, it might even take all my time [...] The more you evacuate, the more there is; but the more text there is, the more Word there is to modulate" (**Explications**, 28). The reasons for the purge of sexuality are multiple. Certainly, the Catholic injunction against sin played an early role, although one that Guyotat understood was erroneous, and productive. In the Deep reveals just how productive this inherited notion was for a young Catholic boy writing under the throes of the prohibited. More importantly, sexuality is a root, a seminal impulse, sealing our pact with life, with procreation and the imperative of survival. There are also political reasons to this choice, which are that sexuality opens the floodgates for the injustices of history on the oppressed, churning out fodder for exploitation. Also, that capitalism has latched onto desire as one of its latest, and most intimate, frontiers. Aesthetic reasons turn to sexuality as a pro-creative source, the impulse and possibility of material creation. And then there is the physical and emotional reality of sex as a place of surrender and bliss, where the self can be forgotten in undifferentiated becoming, belonging, where one is delivered to what is stronger than oneself. The excreta of sex, writes Guyotat, incite "to the unreason of the self in the great reason of the Universe" (In the Deep). And add to this a base productivist reason: wouldn't you write if you'd hooked the protocol to masturbation?

So it is all about sex. And it is not about sex at all. And honestly, it's true, as a species we produce ejaculate scum (power, violence, control). Guyotat is nothing if not a realist. But his comes with optimism. "The more you evacuate, the more there is; but the more text there is, the more Word there is to modulate." Language is our collective process; it is the sign system of our relations. If divinity is there, and if Guyotat invents a Word, properly or improperly creative, it's because God, as a movement toward excess, is for him "the instance or the culmination of the Word. Everyone addresses everyone else [...] everyone invokes, but the supreme invoked is God" (**Explications** 28). When we are speaking to each other, might we have this extremist form of address, supreme as if we were indeed addressing ourselves to another, unimaginable reason? Does Guyotat invert it into prostitutional form because its light would blind us if he didn't, its reason shatter ours? Or is it because worlds are produced materially by stroking, wandering, and erring?

Works Cited

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