

IN ADVANCE OF AN ERRATUM

Or, in anticipation of Michael Dean's *Jumping Bones*

"Your good woman is not badly done, but she is not alive", says Balzac's painter Frenhofer to his colleague Porbus, a first indication of the unstable foundation on which the novella *The Unknown Masterpiece* is built. Frenhofer's failure to capture life in a painting, or his rendition of life as a mass of over-layered smudges and formless oil, is recounted in 1831, well before – it would seem – the thought of the non-figurative, of a painting liberated from corporeal debts and the hampers of mimesis, occurred to actual, rather than fictional, painters. In the novella, abstraction is narrated as mortal failure, as obliteration of both picture and painter. Yet, rereading it today, it appears that Balzac pre-empts the possibility of a purified representation, and that later art's forays into a world of ideas are debilitated, in their claims of transparency and weightlessness, by Balzac's fatidic preamble. That abstraction, however intransigent or revolutionary, would always be appraised against the figure, or assumed to figure as an idiosyncratic, skeletal, disincarnate life-form; finally, that abstraction is supposed to be somehow – abstractly, conceptually – alive. Before its very emergence, the thought of abstraction as visual imponderability, of a figuration uncoupled from earthly ballast and material referent, is contaminated, weighed down. Imagined by a writer, 'the first abstract picture' is denounced as failure, as crippled representation, and not told as the capture of ethereal form of visuality. Placed in this chronology, the discourse of visual abstraction is always haunted by a comparison with a body, by a form of verification it needs to withstand, so as to protect its own purity and legitimacy from the indictment of botched likeness, of pigment "in the wrong place".

Generally expunged from the story of abstract art, in favour of the tropes of visual emancipation stemming from within painting itself, Balzac's text reads at two different levels, as a hinge between two narratives: one of the painting's defacement and one of the characters, those who await that painting's revelation, becoming themselves, manifesting as bodies, as effort and desire. The 'exhibition' of Frenhofer's portrait is promised and delayed throughout the text, and offered only at its very end. Meanwhile, all other protagonists oscillate between the definitions, and labours, of 'art' and 'life'. Poussin is tormented by the exigencies of artistic beauty: to serve it, he must sacrifice love. Porbus works "with such passionate fervor that beads of sweat gather upon his bare forehead; (...) so quickly, in brief, impatient jerks, that it seemed to young Poussin as if some familiar spirit inhabiting the body of this strange being took a grotesque pleasure in making use of the man's hands against his own will." There is a profusion whispering and touching, of moments of diabolical intensity and desolate languor, of breaths inhaled and exhaled, of muscular contractions, flushed cheeks and bloodshot eyes that permeate the story – they compose something of an anatomic scaffolding for the text, a stage on which characters fleshed out to enliven the text with their motion and indirect glances.

Simultaneously, and conversely, master Frenhofer adds more and more touches to the portrait in the seclusion of his studio: as opposed to filling it with the "warm breath of life that comes and goes through that splendid body," this surplus will suffocate the painting, drench it in the very matter it sought to undo. As the characters are brought into presence, the unseen masterpiece is removed from visual experience: from what the 19th century could 'see' and comprehend. "There is a woman beneath," exclaims Porbus, calling Poussin's attention to the wall of amorphous paint with which "the old artist had overlaid and concealed his work in the quest of perfection". Supposed to vanish, its materiality suspended and infused by the very flow of life, by the flow of blood in that life's veins, to incarnate in its own unmaking and in the "form of a living girl", the portrait of Catherine Lescault is an opaque screen of gestural marks. The canvas is promptly incinerated so that the story can end, and so that – at another level – a contemporaneous 'world of vision', the thoughts of what pictures are to do and show, can be re-validated.

The Unknown Masterpiece might work as historical counterweight to the modest gamble of this text, as its interspersed narrative arcs mirror an oscillation between what Michael Dean

might be said to represent or to abstract in his work, between what he seems to say and to pass over in silence. His work might be the slow-motion writing of a dictionary, whose A is a threshold of enunciation and whose Z is the intimation of embodiment. In between, it weaves a grammar and a syntax for quasi-presence and almost-text, for all the symmetries that could hold them in relation of reciprocity and in mutual resonance. Suffused with text, with a programmatically reduced lexicon and a flurry of permutations between the subjects and predicates of exhibitions, interpreted in its own words and syncopated scripts, Michael Dean's work has a singular resistance to the jargon of art criticism: it seems to require new terms, as synonyms and antonyms for its own, it seems to be – or to fill in with concrete and movement – the 'want of a better word'. This conventional prolepsis – 'for want of a better word' – demarcates here a space of possible relations between works and viewers, somewhat indifferent to the critical formulations that would elucidate their nature. A 'want' I will try and circumvent by detours and approximations, navigating the ways in which the work settles for neither form nor text as mode of address, and is not *about* something – or not about something other than its own existence, about the spatial joints and affective ligaments that undergird a moment of encounter.

Balzac, my intercessor, seems to help when writing about work that pries at the seams between the 'unknown' (a secret that might be divulged) and the 'unsayable' (the ways in which that secret might be shared and remain secret). The anticipation and destruction of Catherine Lescault's portrait mirrors the inadequacy of a text that precedes the existence of the exhibition, but that it wills into language. Trying to say as much as can be said in advance of the formation of the exhibition might very well produce a text that does not correspond to the experience of pacing the exhibition, once it has gestated in the mind of its maker and in the space, once it has 'opened'. So this text might be a foreword to a drastic revision, to an extended erratum looking for other ways to calibrate figures of speech, sight and touch, so that words and images appear to be synchronized: unfolding at the same speed, via the same stations and moments of intensity.

Between textual and visual abstractions and invocations, Michael Dean radicalizes the disjunction between words and pictures, to the same extent that it dresses up their accord – the possibility that they would function in tandem, transparently respond to and echo one another – as a horizon of interpretation. A double move by which his anatomical glyphs appear as the petrified residues of language – the physical foundations on which names rest, a moment at the origination of language where things were called what they were – and by which visual forms outline a site of enunciation, a place where something could be said to and about them. Doubly engaged, this distinction – which is art history's disciplinary legitimacy, its mission to word pictures into their right place – is muddled. The work is an alphabet that mixes gestures, sounds and shapes, that mistakes one for the other, as if the truth of each could only be apprehended as the other's correlate, as if they stemmed from a common root, as if only together they could form a sentence. Balzac again, this time from *Louis Lambert*:

"What a fine book might be written of the life and adventures of a word! It has, of course, received various stamps from the occasions on which it has served its purpose; it has conveyed different ideas in different places; but is it not still grander to think of it under the three aspects of soul, body, and motion? (...) In the word *True* do we not discern a certain imaginary rectitude? Does not the compact brevity of its sound suggest a vague image of chaste nudity and the simplicity of Truth in all things? The syllable seems to me singularly crisp and fresh. But is it not so with every root word? They are all stamped with a living power that comes from the soul, and which they restore to the soul through the mysterious and wonderful action and reaction between thought and speech. Might we not speak of it as a lover drawing from the lips of his mistress as much love as he presses into them?"

In this idiosyncratic archaeology of thought, words carve sense out of matter, only for their material, sensuous remainder to return and infest thinking, when words are voiced. I think there is a trace of another, complementary archaeology in Michael Dean's work: the intimation of a wholeness before the divide between 'us' and 'non-us' – just before the turning away from what we are not, so that we can begin to become who we are. But, just as well, this might be a

step forward, after and beyond our electronically-enhanced, false sense of manageability, the duplicitous interfaces we employ to interact with the world, the prosthetic extension of our senses. The imagination of all screens being simultaneously switched off, with the differences or contrasts their glow illuminated suddenly ungraspable, to be groped in dark silence.

Regardless of its direction, this step is taken across a loss. Archaic, futurological, or presented in the immediacy of experience, it interrupts history – history in the sense of a progressive organization of matter and thought, a process in which mental faculties are imprinted into languid matter, disembodied matter to extract its intelligibility, carve into its body a breach where there can metaphysics and economic exchange, tragedy and football games. The step muddles laws and categories, as it makes visible the obstacles in imagining our pre- and our post-, how the epithets of ‘the modern’ were gained or extracted, how distinctions might be lost, buried back into matter. How there might be an inception of and an end to the process of untangling symbols and wax tablets, aspirations and post-technological goo, animal fat and scribbles on the metal bodies of disused machines, a wooden implement of unknown ritual or practical purpose and a surgical graft, etched rocks and the movements of a self, a world before us and one after us, a world without us and us without a world.

In procession, anatomical fragments seek something to grasp, something against which they could exert their inertial strength, something they could adhere to – either what was the larger entity they were uncoupled from, or a fold in space with which their delicately vascularised texture could interlock: their spatial negative. The artist book that accompanies the exhibition, *NOW LEAVES*, modulates, in different syntactic configurations, its ambiguous “leaves”, its vegetal or motile senses, rendered in a typography where each letter is a coiling, folding tongue – the convulsions by which the organ filters air and proffers speech, as well as complicates the correspondences between auctorial self and its public enunciation. An organ without a body both apes the utilitarian clarity of a font type, and demonstrates, in its spasms, it can enact the functions of a whole body, a body whose ‘identity’ is repeatedly touched and mouthed, palpated by the tongue’s twists and turns, defended by its exclamations – voiced in the distended temporality of “now”, in the places where “leaves” are and that they might leave. Muscular speech that remembers and commands, ingests and masticates and spits its words as incantations, blasphemies or murmurs. The feel of words in a larynx-less and ear-less communication: the anatomical equivalent of the tropes that writers write out their own selves, that their words will affix themselves to and make palpable a certain reality.

A conjunctive tissue forms between the material stand-ins for the presence of the artist and that of the viewer, between the echoes of they might say to each other. A vocabulary and an aesthetics form around the possibility of an intimate suture, of porous vulnerability, of “my body in the same place as your body”, as Michael Dean notes in the 2009 book *November to November*. Oversize or diminutive, the dissected fragments are totems of and measurement units for a process of recomposition. These are sculptural “film stills”, frozen articulations of sets and protagonists, from a fluid texture of reciprocities, of physical and affective symmetries. A stage is set for an artistic reconstruction of intimacy – a crucial notion for the work, and maybe the engine of its politics. While its poetics is that intimacy is not a precise exchange of signs or ideas – an encounter between identities looking each other in the eyes –, but reduced to the bare bones of exchangeability and then ramified into all the forms in which those bones can be joined.

If the work can be said to have a ‘protocol’, this might be a wordless agreement between artist and visitor, the sharing of a fragility – intimacy says “Break me not” –, where object-words and word-objects sketch a biography of togetherness. Defining intimacy is inspecting its withdrawal, the many ways in which it wishes to be left alone by definitions and the legalities, its ploys of resistance and retreat from probing eyes. Intimacy is its own society, traversed and held by faint echoes of all the forms in which a society props itself up. Intimacy, as shared loss of scale, chronology and identity confines, is farthest removed from the reach of “the law”. With its own co-existence, shared-ness as norm, it is a law-less jurisdiction. In it, rather than held in separation and abeyance, identities accumulate: what they have and what they do not is

continuously offered to the other – a contract whose only object is equilibrium, a bond that does not bind, an oath softly spoken.

A sentiment or purpose lived in common mean that the protagonists of sharing lack the distance to look at one another, but can look at the same object from the same secret vantage point. *Jumping Bones* might be an abstract reconstruction of intimacy, or a mimesis of what is abstract – and therefore communicable – in its folds and copulas: an approximation, as much as language and form allow, of the terminus, or vanishing point of intimacy, where a body fully inhabits the place of another body and thus slips away from both language and form. It might open the compressed and convoluted space of intimacy, fashioning it into an exhibition, anchoring it between public and private – whose overlap is the spatial specificity of the art gallery. It might sound like a love letter without addressee, an abstraction of caress and separation, or it might be inflected with a political poignancy: it would not explicate what is loved and what is lost, or by whom, but would place its metabolism – the arithmetic of gestures by which intimacy always stays identical to itself – on a grid of publicness.

Absorbed in the chronologies of love, enthusiasm, grief or solace, intimacy is political, even if delicately, furtively so, by fusing the positive and negative of an affective cast. Its political stringency increases when politics proper replicates it as toxic proximity, by not leaving its citizens and subjects alone, by encroaching upon bodies and selves, by reaching out until there is no space left. ‘The contemporary’ amalgamates unlike realities, sense and simulation, emergencies and that which does not emerge, ‘news’ and numbness, distress and the general hum in which it drowns. Bad intimacy is one, incomplete definition of contemporary politics: against its grain and accelerations, intimacy wants – arduously and inconspicuously, taking as many steps forward as it does backward – to lead “a good life in a bad life”. (The “bad life”, a formulation Judith Butler borrows from Adorno, is that of the ungrievable: “told he or she is dispensable, and registering at an affective and corporeal level that his or her life is not worth safeguarding, protecting and valuing. This is someone who understands that she or he will not be grieved for if his or her life were lost, and so one for whom the conditional claim ‘I would not be grieved for’ is actively lived in the present moment.” A neologism, yet to be coined, could capture the destiny of happiness, it too without scene and time, expropriated and marketed, drained of its coagulating force.)

A concatenation of shapes with no recognizable referent, of gestures whose efficacy cannot be judged by the vigour with which they grasp an object, of transactions where what is given and what is taken is only divulged as an equivalence: all these, perhaps, as a stage for thinking about minor or the gravest losses, for weighing simple or ecstatic joys. A stage for the co-presence of what has not yet been thought, gained and shared.