

Selections from “Exploded Meditation” · *Michel Butor*

The Hearth

INSIDE THIS POT I have placed a vineyard, a city, a river. This is in order to obtain the elixir of countryside according to a recipe which my parents have lost but of which my grandparents still had a faint recollection. There are those who claim that it absolutely requires sea water, others some ancient ruins, others musical instruments, and it is quite possible, but I have none at hand for the moment and time in this dungeon is pressing. I trust that the substitutes which I have imagined will serve and that I will obtain at last that drop of ink for which I have been searching since childhood, which in falling from a brush onto a sheet of paper would suddenly render the latter quite white around one letter that would replace a vocable that would replace talk that would at last let me breathe, would grant me speech at last, a word that would establish silence in the bastille, transform it into space in which to stretch out the arms at last, while looking at the countryside, the countryside where one keeps still.

The Wall

I followed its length through years of childhood to reach that school where I dreamed of America and the trade winds, brushing it with my left hand on the way, my right on the return, and I had the feeling that each day it grew somewhat taller and lengthened, as if the touch of my hand nourished it, as if little by little I emptied myself into it. And all the bread that I ate, all the water I drank, all the books I read, it seemed as though all that were taken from me by the vampire wall; and every night as I went to bed I swore to myself that I would not touch it again, that I would pass on the other sidewalk, and every morning, after breakfast, irresistibly I crossed the street, and I thrust my hands into my pockets though knowing it would last no more than a few steps, and despairing, I felt myself suddenly brushing it, wasting, forgetting; the taunts of hunger, thirst, and ignorance ringing in my ears.

The Ax

Having severed the head from the last descendant of the royal family, the headsman wipes his blade on a bronze scarf, then, while the ancient nobles, lamenting, carry away the cadaver to lay him in the mausoleum beside his parents, he sets the shaft of his ax in a slot provided centuries earlier for that purpose by the founder of the dynasty in the center of the execution square. The crowd had loved the prince, held in high esteem the gentlemen who had managed throughout all the disturbances to maintain a tradition of

courtliness, but the prophecies must be fulfilled, the wheel of fortune must turn, the new order must prevail; and, to provide future celebrations with the quality of black capable of setting off the brilliant apparel of the guild of innovators, the former authorities take on for life a mourning sufficiently solemn.

The Yoke

In order to harness the buffalo-dragons, who alone are capable of pulling the stone chariots on which the idols circulate for the new year's celebration, one must cast lava yokes from the flow of live volcanoes. It is advisable consequently to predetermine not only the time of eruption but also the general direction of the flow. Channels are hewn and molds of great depth, which they line with fire brick. The difficulty is in wrenching the piece from the bowels of the earth once calm has returned. This requires buffalo-dragons harnessed with yokes of lava, so that if by some misfortune the latter should all chance to be cracked at once, it would indeed be possible to manufacture others, but in no way to make use of them. The idols would then be stilled, good for selling to occidentals for placing in their museums, while the race of buffalo-dragons would become extinct, like the mammoth or the hipparion.

The Refusal

The petitioner bows before the Emperor of the Far-Eastern isles who indicates his reply on a silken scroll. He does not dare to look, bows, and returns to his hotel. After closing off all egress he unrolls the august document, realizes that it is a refusal but so exquisitely traced that it is clear not only that his majesty retains a close friendship for him, that the most favorable of reasons must have motivated his position, but also that he is profoundly grateful for the confidence evinced in the presentation of his request. Thereupon he hangs his calligram in the niche of honor, celebrates it with a bouquet of three chrysanthemums which he renews daily, modifying each time the relationship of their nuances, the length, the arch of their petals, the number of leaves and height of the stems, and elicits for it the admiration of all his friends who no longer dare to present to the palace the slightest request, fearing the humiliation of seeing it accepted.

The Theater

The way in which the performance springs up at the detour of a comma. A stroke of the brush, it is the prince who moves forward and, in a monologue that is splendidly contorted, comes to tell us of his thwarted love for the daughter of the king of the Indies. The machinery sets in motion, a curtain descends from the flies, embroidered with purple sturgeons and

mottled Sargassum fish. We understand that the scene is taking place at the bottom of the sea. Consequently the two lovers do not breathe the same element; how can they be reunited? A monster passes sneering. An enchanter busies himself about his ovens where a cold petrified fire heats his retorts without troubling the surrounding waters. From the orchestra come swirls of guitar, rustlings of the oboe. A divinity descends seated on a sea shell; she proposes to the prince a change of his body; it will be a long and difficult operation. His father the king, his mother the queen come to plead with him to renounce this project. His light voice, over the stress of objurgations, proclaims his unshakable decision. Crying, the whole court, including the fish dignitaries, assists at the erection of the surgical bed. Nurses with long fins proceed with the anesthesia. The prince sings a rending aria before going to sleep beneath the mask. It is the end of act one; the spectators fidget and ask themselves how this will all turn out.

*Translated by
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