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Some Lovely Scrubbing

A review of *Emblems of Desire: Selections from the Délie of Maurice Scève*, edited and translated from the French by Richard Sieburth (Archipelago Books, 2007)

Maurice Scève's life reads like a side-plot in a Paul Auster novel. Shortly after completing a humanistic biblical epic of three thousand alexandrines, he disappeared in plague in the mid-sixteenth century; Joyce's French translators rediscovered his works in the 1920s. These works comprise an anonymous translation of a popular Spanish romance novel, the orchestration of elaborate court pagentry, miscellaneous writings attributed to his friends (perhaps), and the first Petrarchan *canzoniere* to be written in French, the 449-stanza *Délie*. In *Emblems of Desire*, Richard Sieburth translates eighty-eight stanzas from throughout the larger work. They appear alongside woodcut illustrations that originally accompanied the poems.

Given Scève's love of hoax (the most solid fact of his biography is an anecdote about uncovering the tomb of Petrarch's Laura) and a back-cover blurb by Auster himself hailing this edition as "a miracle of literary invention," a conspiracy-minded reader might seek anagrams and errant contemporary allusions that expose the volume as a fake. I have since confirmed Scève's existence as a literary fact but still defend my suspicion: *Délie* seems as singular as make-believe.

Scève's project resembles Petrarch's and would be a good prompt for a creative writing class: fall in love with someone who rejects you, then write hundreds of poems charting your passion's torments and trills. Unlike Petrarch and Dante, though, Scève, the humanist, has no hope for reunion in the afterlife. As a result, the beloved's bodily absence cannot instruct him in divine pleasures. If the Italian poets construct spiraling ascents, Scève flattens a widening patch in a field. Some mornings, the stalks have grown back and he writes like someone in Dante's Hell: time exists with variations that resemble development, but, in the end, it only accumulates.

The scythe Scève swings strikes in ten-line dizains (rhymes with "dizzying"). Each of these stanzas considers an aspect of his obses-

sion in a form that twists like a sonnet, but ends four lines sooner. The effect is similar to a sermon shouted from a passing train or a portrait sketched by lightning: I expect the proportions that round off a sonnet (the 4:3 ratio Plato identified as the effeminate Lydian mode), but find instead the clipped decimation of Scève's decimalism. Each take is not just cut off, as from a continuous state of mind, but sharply compacted as if to register a distinct state of being.

This ferocious compression, coupled with the huge number of stanzas (and less than a fifth of them translated here), allures and disturbs me. It suggests Dickinson, whom Scève sometimes brings to mind ("Pain takes hold of its object like the plague," "Like mountains, commonly said to be / More frigid as they approach the sun"). Each stanza comes to a conclusion, but none closes the subject. Each stanza expands and revises earlier closures, saying *also this* and *instead of that*, as though the last line, this time, might really nail it, even as Scève sits up in bed again ("resuscitating my immortal cares") and begins another stanza.

Scève wants relief, and he wants to show the scope of his subject; this dual, in some ways self-canceling desire produces his most intriguing typographical oddity. As Sieburth notes in his introduction, commas precede ampersands ("my grief, & sole delight"), so that the punctuation insists on separation, while the conjunction joins. Thus, these dizains compose a sort of flip-book, with each stanza as a discrete page or slide.

Each stanza comes to a conclusion, for a desperate moment. Is such summing up, as rest but equally as the articulation of restiveness, untrue to the desperation it develops from? We may compare Scève's stanzas with the dizains of John Ashbery's Scève-inspired "Fragment" in *The Double Dream of Spring*. The Ashbery poem, which shows Scève's influence in its winding sentences made up of compressed bursts of interiority ("Seen from inside all is abruptness"), offers primarily an atmosphere, a mode of milling, rather than a formulation of where that mode ends up. His lush, meditative poem laps at us; Scève's stanzas scrub. Ashbery's "Fragment" forms an opaque mosaic—the individually beautiful tiles ("wall and reef / Imbibe and the impossible saturation, / New kinds of fun, is an earnest / Of the certain future. Yet the spores of the / Difference as it's imagined flower / In complicated chains for the eyebrow") matter less than the syntax that holds them.

Scève's art is more iconographic. Each stanza's compressed snow-globe-scene becomes a snowball that Scève flings, one after another, as if to break through the boundary of his passion. Instead, though, each ball splatters against that larger globe and decorates its limits.

Many of these stanzas are knotty and dark. Because Scève's pining won't find relief in heaven, he is doomed to the present, unable to die. "What need is there to go on slaying me? / Who loves in vain has far enough of death," Scève says in *Dizain* 60, as though death, in excess, inoculates us with tolerance of it. As a body without a soul and a man who cannot stay dead ("I live for you, & for myself am dead"), Scève recalls horror movie halfings who lust for the finality of a death to end all sequels. In number 316, the "sign of mercy" he desires from the beloved's face is closer to that of a mercy killing than to a troubadour's longed-for pity. While the troubadour begged, let me move you by the truth of my love, Scève, in number 188, sees the "just demands" of "merit alone" as worthless. He wants her murderous pity because nothing else works. "Put me out of my pain," is his request.

Immune to the laws of death, Scève would alter those of life. The swoons of his imagination recall Keats and Henri Michaux, whom Sieburth has also translated. In 408, he asks to be buried in "the damp tomb" of his beloved's "delicate breast," and I don't picture her memorizing one of his poems, as Shakespeare might have her do. Instead her ribs must open literally for his literal body to enter. Elsewhere, Scève becomes his beloved's shadow. Revising the figure immediately, he turns "far swifter / Than a shadow chasing after its body." But this near-union ends as quickly as it was sparked. Their "two wills fall out of tune." Scève diagnoses this dis-tuning as "something inhuman." I love it that to be changed into the beloved's shadow, then into something closer than a shadow, is not inhuman, but what breaks the fortunate metamorphosis is.

Among such dense, shadowy raptures, there are moments of calm. Number 163 gives Scève a way to "still feel, though less so than at the start." This comfort makes his constant discomfort more clear: "For as you extinguished my affliction, you secured this burnt offering of my heart." So a piece of wood, doused as it burns, retains the look of being burned.

These textures can also mingle in single stanzas. Number 377 mixes reasoned “assurance” and “crazily” desired ecstasy. Sieburth’s useful notes tell us that “yellow represents *jouissance*, or full erotic *joyance*, in tension with the virtuous purity (or fidelity) of white.”

This silky sheen on the color of straw
Indicates the goal I crazily pursue:
An assurance, Lady, of my intentions,
Were such signs understood by you.
 For yellow is the reward I expect
(Allow me to name my aspirations,
Prepared as I am for so far less),
Set off by the white slashings of your dress:
 And the fluffy snowswells amid these slits
Express fidelity, as befits requited bliss.

First, there is the swiftness of the argument (Scève’s desire is “set off” in contrast to the symbol of her purity, as he is “set off” on its trail; following the colon, the same symbol signals fidelity to their imagined union), which recalls Donne. Then, in his Ashberian way, Scève shifts tone to tone. I love the mix of haughtiness (“Were such signs understood by you”) and humility (“Prepared as I am for so much less”), how the “slashings” of the stanza’s erotic peak are introduced and delayed by the parenthetical politeness, and how awareness of his pursuit’s madness (seen not in the color of straw, but in the more resplendent and ephemeral “sheen on the color”) leads to his courtly assertion of intentions.

Scève makes flexible use of his ten-line form—some stanzas develop a single thought, others have hinges after six or eight lines. Here, a 4/4/2 structure divides loosely into couplets, with one couplet separated by the parenthetical lines, so the more discrete final couplet clarifies the stanza’s structure as well as its rhetoric.

Sieburth also notes that Ovid compares Tereus’s desire to rape Philomela to the “sudden combustion of yellow straw,” and that the “fluffy snowswells” evoke “the puffs of snowy white showing from the *creves* of slashed sleeves.” Scève typically expresses his obsessive, elemental cosmology—love, for him, is comprised of night and day, fire and water, shadow and light—through such public conceits. The woodcuttings’ illustration of folksy proverbs (the one called *The*

Suicide of the Viper illustrates the phrase “To give you life I give me death”) is even broader, suggesting that the poems, too, could be reduced to cartoon and inscription.

The familiarity of Scève’s allusions highlights the more irredeemably private parts of his work. The references to Petrarch and myth help him work out his subject, finding its outline in the dark, casting forth as he does elsewhere by speaking to himself: “Will I live forever then? No: your days / Will end far away. Where? O let it go.” Among the needling specificity through which he builds a monument to his love, what Scève lets go of lets him go on: while many of the poems try to rise for and against his passion, the more restful ones bow to it. In this posture, Scève—“The more acute, the less it can be told”—is silenced. It is a posture that looks like reading.