



# **The Deep Zoo**

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# *THE DEEP ZOO*

TWO ESSAYS

BY

Rikki Ducornet



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## THE DEEP ZOO

Writing is the uncovering of that which was unrevealed.

— Ghani Alani, *Dreaming Paradise*

◆ In the tradition of Islam, the first word that was revealed to Mohammed was *Igrá* (Read!). The world is a translation of the divine, and its manifestation. To write a text is to propose a reading of the world and to reveal its potencies. Writing is reading and reading a way back to the initial impulse. Both are acts of revelation.

◆ The Ottoman calligraphers delighted in creating mazes of embellishment in which the text was secreted like a treasure. The text needed to be deciphered and the task proved the worthiness of the reader. These calligrapher's mazes remind us that if the text is the mirror of an exorbitant, mutable universe, it is playful, too. The maze places the text within an intimate space, very like a garden, where the text hides, then reveals itself; perhaps it could be said such a text is *irresistible*. Writes Gaston Bachelard: *All the spaces of intimacy are designated by an attraction (Poetics of Space)*.

◆ The texts we write are not visible until they are written. Like a creature coaxed from out a deep wood, the text reveals itself little by little. The maze evokes a multiplicity of approaches, the many tricks we employ to tempt the text hither. The maze is both closed and open; it demands to be approached with a *thoughtful lightness* (Calvino). The powers lurking within it are like stars. Despite their age and inaccessibility, their light continues to reach us and to reveal us to ourselves.

◆ A playful mind is deeply responsive to the world and informed by powers instilled during infancy and childhood, powers that animate the imagination with primal energies. A playful mind is guided as much by attraction as consistency and coherence — and I am thinking here of Lewis Carroll's Looking Glass world — its consistent tyrants, the coherence of its nonsense and the energy of Alice's fearless lucidity. The Looking Glass reminds us that the world's maze is attractive to eager thinkers. After all, playfulness describes as much the scientist as the artist (and Lewis Carroll was both).

The idea that the world was engendered by the spoken word comes to us from Egypt. Here language flourished, mirroring and delighting in the phenomenal world. Here Paradise persisted; the gods and their creatures dwelling together in good understanding or, phrased differently, in *knowledge* of one another. And if the world of nature and its book indicated the divine, it also provided a place of unlimited encounters. To name a thing was to acknowledge and evoke its primary potencies — religious, medical and magical. Plants, minerals and animals were not only animated by the divine breath (*nous*), they were its vessels. Each tree, bird, river and star was an altar, the dwelling place of a god. To gaze upon the world's image reflected in the waters of the Nile was to gaze into and reflect upon a sacred face or body: Hathor the cow-faced goddess embodied by the moon, Horus, the falcon, perched among the reeds.

Deep in the desert, each fossil shell was seen as Hathor's gift, tossed to earth from the sky; the fossil sea urchin's five-pointed star needled to its back indicated its stellar origins and explains why such things are found placed near the dead in ancient tombs. To use a lovely term of Gaston Bachelard's, such a reverie — and to leap from stone to star can only be called a reverie — *digs life deeper, enlarge(s) the depth of life*. Bachelard offers these lines from the poet Vincent Huidobro:

*In my childhood is born a childhood burning like alcohol.  
 I would sit down in the paths of night  
 I would listen to the discourse of the stars  
 And that of the tree.*

— *The Poetics of Revery*

Such *sympathies* — the stone, the moon caught in the branches of the willow, the gods, the stars — are born of looking at the world and a deep dreaming. The ancient world of *sympathies*, rooted in inquisitiveness and informed by imaginative seeing, gave us marvelous aesthetic and scientific achievements; alchemy for example — that exemplary amalgam of science and poetry, that ‘immense word revery’ says Bachelard. It would be a mistake to dismiss such *sympathies* as mere foolishness, for they were born of qualities of mind that illustrate what Italo Calvino call the *lightness of thoughtfulness* (*Six Memos for the Next Millenium*) and illumine his phrase: *poetry is the enemy of chance*. The moment one reaches for the star-struck stone, the revery begins; the moment its star is recognized as a piece of the night sky fallen to earth, the poem begins. Chance gives way to a deep seeing and the recognition of a pattern that informs the mind with light, a pattern that incandescens and *burns like alcohol*. If poetry is the enemy of chance, it is also *the daughter of chance*.

If I have chosen to open this essay with an evocation of an ancient world and its *sympathies*, it is because the urgencies concealed within the maze of the mind that animate our imaginations, provoke incandescence on the page. I am not calling for magical thinking, obscurity or preciousness, but for an eager access to memory, revery and the unconscious — its powers, beauties, terrors and, perhaps above all, its rule-breaking intuitions, and to celebrate with you the mind’s longing to become lighter, free of the weight of received ideas and gravity-bound redundancies. If we were scientists and not writers, we would not waste our time re-inventing gravity. Speaking of a poet he especially admires, Calvino says:

*The miraculous thing about his poetry is that he simply takes the weight out of language to the point that it resembles moonlight.*

— *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*

And Bachelard:

*For things as for souls, the mystery is inside. A reverie of intimacy — of an intimacy which is always human — opens up for the (one) who enters into the mysteries of matter.*

— *The Poetics of Reverie*

The mysteries of matter are the potencies that in the shapes of dreams, landscapes, exemplary instants and so on inform our imagining minds; they are powers. For Bachelard they take the form of shells, a bird's nest, an attic; for Borges a maze, mirrors, the tiger; for Calvino moonlight, the flame and the crystal; for Cortazar ants on the march and the cry of the rooster.

Potencies are never static but in constant flux within our minds and what's more, they *fall in sympathy* with one another. For example, for Borges there is an evident sympathy between the tiger's stripes, the world's maze, language and the maze of the mind; for Calvino between moonlight and the lucent transparency of clear thinking; for Bachelard between attics and a love of solitude; for Cortazar between the cock's cry and the knowledge of mortality, of finitude.



*The world of animals is an ocean of sympathies from which we drink only drops whereas we could drain torrents from it.*

— Lamartine (as quoted by Giovanni Mariottini in his essay on Aloys Zötl, F.M.R. #1)



One evening years ago, a family circus set up its shabby tent in the park of a French village — Le Puy Notre Dame in the Val de Loire — I called home. As I approached the park I heard the sound of a powerful motor and searched the sky for an airplane — a rarity at that time in that place. The sky was empty of everything, even clouds, and the thrumming I heard was the purring of tigers. An instant later I saw the cage and two exquisite tigers, surely drugged; their contentment in such small quarters was uncanny. If I recall this distant evening, its circus and its tigers for you now, it is in guise of an introduction to *potencies in the shape of beasts*.

For the first issue of Franco Maria Ricci's magazine F.M.R., Julio Cortazar was asked to write an essay on the bestiary of a little known and eccentric 19<sup>th</sup> century painter from the foothills of the Bohemian mountains whose name is Aloys Zötl. From 1832 to 1887 — the year of his death — Zötl painted 170 achingly beautiful water-colors of animals inhabiting the ideal landscapes of his imagination. Years were kingdoms: 1832 ruled by fish, 1835 by reptiles, 1837 by the gentle tyranny of birds. André Breton called his bestiary 'the most sumptuous ever seen.'

Instead of describing Zötl's bestiary, Cortazar chooses to walk us through his own Deep Zoo. His essay is titled "A Stroll Among the Cages" and it is a parallel journey on a path *burning like alcohol* that generously leads straight to Cortazar's own holding ground of totems, just as it prepares our eyes for the sight to come: Zötl's lucent tigeries and tigered lucencies:

*And then a cock crowed, if there is a memory it is because of that, but there was no notion of what a cock was, no tranquilizing name, how was I to know that was a cock, that horrible rending of the silence into a thousand pieces, that shattering of space throwing its tinkling glass down on me, a first and frightful Roc.*

This shattering of silence precipitates the infant Cortazar into a waking nightmare that would never abandon him entirely. It informs the beasts that follow — with a vaguely menacing shimmer.

*What comes next, writes Cortazar, has a Guarani Indian name: mamboretá, a name that's long and beautiful just like its green and prickly body, a dagger that suddenly plunges into the middle of your soup or drops onto your cheek when the summer table is set...and there is always an aunt who flees in terror, and a father who authoritatively proclaims the inoffensive nature of the mamboretá while thinking, perhaps, but not mentioning the fact that the female devours the male in the midst of copulation. And Cortazar recalls the terrible moment when the mamboretá would become enraged with him for past torments and look at him from its branch, accusingly. Barking frogs come next (Zötl, by the way, was especially partial to frogs and the lion's part of his bestiary belongs to them), and swarming ants that pass through a house like a detergent, like the fearsome machine of fascism, locusts whose devastation brings Attila to mind, and a couple of amorous lions, their bodies trembling slightly with the orgasm. Cortazar fulfills his promise to us and admirably: we have strolled among the animals although to tell the truth, there were no cages anywhere. The vision is clear, unobstructed and hot. Cortazar has given us totemic potencies; he has given us Aloys Zötl.*

Now, because I cannot offer you Zötl's paintings and because Cortazar chose not to describe them, the task falls to me.

*The imaging consciousness holds its object (such images as it imagines) in an absolute immediacy.*

— Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*

Immediacy is precisely the word that characterizes Aloys Zötl's bestiary. With few exceptions, he had seen his subjects in books only, yet painted them with feverish deliberation. I imagine it was chronic and unrequited longing that drove him on, for his bestiary surges with all the kaleidoscopic opulence of a mushroom enhanced daydream. Spangled and lucent, Zötl's beasts have been conjured hair by hair; one can count their whiskers, their

feathers and their teeth. (One thinks of Borges' magician dreaming hour after hour and one by one the infinite elements that make for a living man.) Zötl's creatures take their ease in gardens as lavish as wonder rooms; he has packed his pictures with rarities so that the overall effect recalls the haunting superabundance of Max Ernst's experiments with rough surfaces and sopping rags, those hieroglyphic landscapes haunted by hierophantic lop lops. Or Borgesian dream gardens which are the amalgam of all the gardens one has ever loved. Zötl's pictures provide a glimpse of paradise: it is a first glimpse, prodigal and unfettered. In other words, Zötl has painted the potencies of Old Time, when to name a thing was to bring it surging into the real. Even his scattered stones are poised for speech.

But — what about tigers? It seems there are none. However, there is a leopard, completed in April, 1837. He is the same leopard that haunts the fables of the Maya and, as all the rest, he is meticulously painted *and he is very still*. Clearly he has heard a sound that has frightened him. Perhaps he has heard, and for the first time, the crowing of a cock. And perhaps this is the writer's task: to make audible a sound of warning — which is also the sound of awakening.



*The subconscious is ceaselessly murmuring, and it is by listening to these murmurs that one hears the truth.*

— Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Revery*

Back to Egypt where things and their names were not seen as separate entities, but were instead in profound sympathy with one another. These perceived sympathies are often very playful, as in this story of Isis and Seth:

Seth, in the form of a bull, attempts to overcome Isis. Fleeing, she takes the form of a little dog holding a knife in its tail and evades him. In his thwarted excitement, Seth ejaculates and his seed spills to the ground.

When Isis sees this she cries: *What an abomination! To have thus scattered your seed!*

Where Seth's seed has fallen, a plant grows called the coloquint (or bitter apple). In ancient Egypt the word for *coloquint* and *your seed* is one and the same.

Within a writer's life, words, just as things, acquire powers. For Borges, *Red* is such a word, as is *Labyrinth* and *Tiger*. And if Beauty in the form of a yellow tiger or a red rose *waits in ambush for us* (*Seven Nights*), beautiful words are the mind's animating flame.

In his essay on his blindness, Borges recalls a cage he saw as a child holding leopards and tigers; he recalls that he *lingered before the tiger's gold and black*. Nearly blind he is no longer able to see red, *that great color which shines in poetry, and which has so many beautiful names*, but it is the yellow of the tiger that persists, as does its beauty and the power of its beautiful name. In his story *The Zahir*, the Tiger is the Zahir; it is the face of God, God's name, the sound He uttered when He created the world, the *Shadow of the Rose* and the *rending of the Veil* (*Labyrinths*). Tiger is the power that brings the unborn universe surging into the real and, what's more, it is the name of the infinite book you and I are writing; it is the letters of each word of this book; Tiger is the calligrapher's maze and also the text hidden within that maze.

It is the *shell* that tigers Bachelard — that lover of intimacy and solitude. A creature with a shell is a *mixed creature*; it reveals and conceals itself simultaneously. You will recall that in ancient times a fossil shell acquired the potencies of the moon. Stones of unusual shapes were empowered by Osiris also; they evoked the myth of his dismemberment and his own scattered limbs. In the myth, Isis gathers the pieces of her husband's broken body and makes him whole; she revives him. For Bachelard, *the fossil is not merely a being that once lived but one that is still asleep in its form*. He is speaking of the *spaces of our intimacy, the centers of (our) fate*; he is speaking of our memories, those powers that, *securely fixed in space*, remain coiled within us ready to spring and inform our lives with immediacy and our thoughts with urgency.

In his *Poetics of Space* Bachelard writes:

*We have the impression that by staying in the motionlessness of its shell, the creature is preparing temporal explosions, not to say whirlwinds of being.*

And in *The Poetics of Revery*:

*The passionate being prepares his explosions and his exploits in ... solitude.*

The shell, the yellow tiger, the crowing cock, the moon — these are the potencies in which time is compressed in the form of memories. To write is to engage a waking dream, to, in solitude, prepare a whirlwind. Says Bachelard:

*... daydreams illuminate the synthesis of immemorial and recollected. In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening.*

For Bachelard, Time has but one reality — that of the instant. The instant is our solitude stripped bare, stripped down to its essential potencies — its Deep Zoo.



*The shapes of time are the prey we want to capture.*

— George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*

When I was a child, I came upon the dead body of a red fox in the woods; it was early summer and the fox's belly was burning brightly with yellow bees. A species of animate calligraphy, the bees rose and fell in a swarm that revealed, then concealed, the corpse. Yellow and black they tigered it and they glamorized it, too — transforming what otherwise might have seemed

horrible into a thing of rare beauty. It is no accident that my first novel opens with the death of a creature in a wood.

If I have, throughout this essay, dwelled on the potencies of what I've been calling the Deep Zoo, it is because it is the work of the writer to move beyond the simple definitions or descriptions of things — which is of limited interest after all — and to bring a dream to life through the alchemy of language; to move from the street — the place of received ideas — into the forest — the place of the unknown.

But the Deep Zoo's attraction is not sufficient. We must take care that our books do not resemble those 17<sup>th</sup> century wonder-rooms or 19<sup>th</sup> century parlors with their meaningless jumbles of stuffed bears, kayaks, giant lobsters and assorted stools. In other words, just as the museum of Natural History has contributed to, perhaps *enabled* our practical knowledge of the phenomenal world — and do not forget that the development of the museum coincides with the exclusion of Christian orthodoxy from the process of scientific inquiry — so must the books we write be free of those restraints that impede aesthetic invention; so must they be *enabled* by the rigors of intellectual coherence. Again, if we are to be quickened by the prime qualities of the Deep Zoo, we cannot, nevertheless, allow our books to be determined by excess or arbitrariness. Ideas and language deserve our chronic, our acute attention. After all, a book is above all a place to think, and the lightness of thoughtfulness our way of approaching the truth.

It is our capacity for moral understanding that enables us to interpret the world and to act thoughtfully and with autonomy. As psychoanalysis demonstrates, knowledge of ourselves and the world allows us to heal, to transcend the moral darkness that suffocates and blinds us. The process of writing a book is similar as it reveals to the writer what is hidden within her: writing is a reading of the self and of the world. *It is a process of knowledge.* That is why the lost roads and uncharted territories of the world's maze deserve our interest. If a book is a place to think, it is a pragmatic place, a place of experiment and discovery, a *battleground* (Calvino's word) where the orthodoxies — religious, political, neurotic — that interfere with clairvoyance, are dismantled and replaced by a new order. In other words, to write in the light of childhood's burning alcohol, with the irresistible ink

of tigers and the cautious uncaging of our own Deep Zoo, we need to be attentive and fearless — above all very curious — and all at the same time.

In Maria Dermout's *The Ten Thousand Things*, a living sea snail in a box guards memories in the shapes of small, disparate objects. When the snail dies it is replaced — a spiritual manipulation that is also an act of magic. Resurgent, the memories continue to inform the world with a playful, essential and erotic mystery. Writes Borges:

*In my soul the afternoon grows wider and I reflect.*

— *Dream Tigers*

## SILLING

Sade completed “that most impure tale” — and the words are his — *The 120 Days of Sodom* — in the Bastille where he was confined for infractions that, if they were outrageous, were not murderous and — unlike civilians in wartime — involved consenting adults. Sade was an outspoken atheist, a libertine and a sodomist at a moment in history when sodomy was punishable by a public breaking of the offending body on the wheel. *The 120 Days* was a purposeful declaration of war against those who would never cease to persecute its author for his singularity. Like a suicide bombing, it is a cry of rage and a rending of the veil; it is an act of defiance and morbidity, the willful embrace of the role of the bogeyman — whose arbitrary and inescapable destiny is acute humiliation and a horrendous death.

*The 120 Days* is so relentlessly obscene that Sade himself declared he hadn’t the stomach to revise it. Yet, when on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July the Bastille was stormed and it seemed the manuscript was lost, he “shed tears of blood” and this because, despite its flaws, he knew he had achieved his object: he had written a book that would never cease to do violence to its author and to the world simultaneously. And yet this novel, unlike any other, also provides a place of reflection (Sade always demands a great deal of *reflection* from his readers) and, for those who share his anomalous vertigo, sexual restlessness, perhaps release. Sade’s brand of restlessness, however, provokes moral disquiet, and, for all its flamboyance, *The 120 Days* is less a pillow book than a novel of distopia. Its manic restlessness and lethal mockeries all lead to a question whose answer was a matter of urgency for Sade himself and is, more than ever, a matter of urgency for us all:

*Why is it...that in this world there are men whose hearts have been so numbed, whose sentiments of honor and delicacy have been so deadened, that one sees them pleased and amused by what degrades and soils them?*  
(492)

In other words, Sade who wrote *the most impure tale that has ever been told since the world began* (253), a book that was the measure of the horror that would, in the name of brotherhood, drench Paris with blood, was on to something. *The 120 Days* is not only a rageful (and at times rueful) procession of the author's own determinisms, it is a mirror of Hell — 600 crimes! — and like Jenin — where this morning as I write, Palestinian civilians are digging in the rubble for their dead — a Hell of human manufacture. One man's imaginary war zone, *The 120 Days* offers an occasion for necessary thoughtfulness. This is, unexpectedly, a moral novel. Sade called it his *Book of Sorrows*.



The *120 Days of Sodom* opens thus:

*The extensive wars wherewith Louis XIV was burdened during his reign, while draining the state's treasury and exhausting the substance of the people, nonetheless contained the secret that led to the prosperity of a swarm of those bloodsuckers who are always on the watch for public calamities, which, instead of appeasing, they promote or invent so as, precisely, to be able to profit from them the more advantageously.* (191)

Sade's satirical intention cannot be clearer. He continues:

*One must not suppose that it was exclusively the low born and vulgar sort which did this swindling; gentlemen of the highest note led the pack.* (191)

Sade next offers up his *champions*, the *four bloodsuckers* and *traffickers* who will *assume the major roles in these unusual orgies*, orgies that will take place in the faraway castle of Silling. They are: The Duc de Blangis and his brother the Bishop of X\*\*\* (a nobleman, therefore, and a man of the church), the celebrated Durcet and the Président de Curval (business and secular authority. How much fun Sade would have had with Enron, the current scandals rocking the Catholic church, the skeletons that continue to kick in Kissinger's closets!).

Now let us examine, beneath Sade's burning glass, his four uncharitable and immutable villains, *ces messieurs* who will live out their errant, their costly lusts, in Silling.

First of all, the Duc de Blangis, the inheritor of *immense wealth* has been endowed by nature *with every impulse, every inspiration required for its abuse*. What's more, he was: *Born treacherous, harsh, imperious, barbaric, selfish...* (he is) *a liar, a gourmand, a drunk, a dastard, a sodomite, fond of incest, given to murdering, to arson, to theft...* (198). His brother, the Bishop of X\*\*\*, *has the same black soul, the same penchant for crime, the same contempt for religion, the same atheism, the same deception and cunning* (203). Our financier, Durcet's loftiest pleasure is *to have his anus tickled by the Duc's enormous member* (210) (speculators have always been tickled by inherited wealth). Finally — and I have purposefully saved the Président de Curval for last — we come to this *pillar of society worn by debauchery to a singular degree* (205) and who is little more than a skeleton caked with shit. Curval is exemplary of Sade's emblematic, self-hating, pleasure-fearing endeavor. He surges throughout the novel in various guises — for example *the man from Roule who fucks in shrouds and coffins and who, familiar with the idea of death (is) hence unafraid of it* (505). A sentiment familiar to those who have read the tales of torturers whose *little ceremonies* make them feel more virile, more alive, even immortal. Like all men who torture, Sade's champions are fearful of the body and its determinisms: shit, sex and death, and so must *shiver* it, reduce it from three dimensions to two, make it into meat:

*Frigs the whore's clitoris ... chops it up with a knife ...* (582)

and in this way demonstrate it never had any meaning, any *individuality* (Silling's slaves are silenced, reduced to dumb beasts; their tongues may be cut out, their mouths sewn shut). Silling's victims are emptied out and flattened — as some would do to an entire country in order to establish that it was never there.

Back to Curval. He is *entirely jaded*. He is, as was Sade, nearly impotent, and needs nearly *three hours of excess, and the most outrageous excess ... before one could hope to inspire a voluptuous reaction in him* (206). Already dead, animated by fantastications and the unlimited power Silling affords him, Curval frolics in the boneyards of his making and leaps to a particularly inspired *dance macabre*. He embodies all of Sade's libertines for whom the spasms of orgasm and the death throes converge. This convergence never ceases to throb at the icy core of *The 120 Days* and to propulse an extremity of longing that, as time passes, seems less a boast and more a possibility:

*Ah, how many times, by God, have I not longed to be able to  
assail the sun, snatch it out of the universe, make a general darkness, or use  
that star to burn the world.* (364)

The promise of *general darkness*, is the shadow beneath which the universe of Silling leans into entropy, a faded universe, its ancient machinery — space and time — grinding to a deafening halt, yet capable of igniting in one last hideous conflagration. Masters of space, Curval and the other champions toil, with furious detachment, on the side of Time; they excel in the service of its machinations. Their little ceremonies assure an eternity of agony, and paradoxically, precipitous death. (Most of the victims of Silling are very young.) As the old saw would have it, money buys time; Curval is filthy rich and it is wealth, Sade reminds us, that enables him and the others to indulge in *unusual pastimes*. Excessive wealth makes all our Sillings possible. It buys U.S. F-16s and Apache helicopters.



Like the *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The 120 Days* is propelled by stories. Radical and inexorable malice is assured by the virago storytellers' unavoidable soliloquies that, *decorated with numerous and searching details... apt to have an immense influence* (271) commence punctually at six o'clock, like the evening news. The storytellers are *moulins à paroles* — word mills — whose narrations keep the mill of death oiled with cum and ceaselessly wheeling. Like the ogresses of fairytales or the winds of war, their mills grind bones. The sounds of bones breaking castanet the air, as do, with whorlwindish velocity, the champions' groans. To keep the mill turning, the four agree to banish rational thinking from Silling and to replace it with the logic of nightmare:

*Any friend ... who may take it into his head to act in accordance  
with a single glimmer of common sense ... shall be fined ten-thousand  
francs. (248)*

— a rule that could have been invented by Robespierre (who sent lace-makers to the guillotine for practicing a frivolous craft), Sharon (who, as I write, will not allow ambulances into places he has besieged, nor allow for the burial of the dead), and our own President, for that matter, so eagerly gearing up for a war with Iraq.

When coupling — and their couplings are hectic and meticulous — the *Messieurs*, their jaded imaginations ignited by the storytellers' descriptions of bodies *reduced to scarlet shambles* (463), *of pricks stabbed with a heavy cobbler's awl* (409), *of bone-shattering cuffs* (459) are incapable of not only compassion but erotic delight; they collide into the bodies of those they hold in thrall like tanks slamming into kitchens. Is it surprising, then, that they like to dine on shit? In Silling, sexuality is the embodiment of fury, a bloody theater, an act of terror. Like a species of athanor in reverse, Silling transmutes everything into lead.



You will recall that in his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant proposes that each one of us *always act in such a way that you can also will that the maxim of your action should become universal law (V)*. It is evident that for the individual with a will to do good, Kant's criterion affords a rigorous practice in moral living, one that, above all, demands a searching conscience and fearless inquisitiveness, and the willingness to restlessly question dogmatic thinking — one's own and that of others — to engage in, and tirelessly, a process of disenthralment.

Sade's Silling offers a Manichean reversal and negation of such a moral practice. In Silling, Libertine Law, Universal Law and the Law of Nature are one and the same. The friends are simply acting as Nature intends: brutal and blind — Sade an anti-Rousseau (although he did admire that *threat for dull-witted bigots!*) and, curiously, very much in keeping with the teachings of the Inquisition which, fed by stories of naked New Worlders worshipping devils and buggering one another, argue that nature, a satanic realm studded with glamors and perversions, demons in the shapes of bears, wenches and wolves, the semen of frogs and serpents teased into malefic powers — leads straight to madness. Such pessimism evokes a radical Gnosticism, proclaiming as it does man's active place in a scheme of chronic pain and interminable night. Sade's Nature knows nothing of pity and is forever tormenting her creatures with plagues and mortifications; later, in *Juliette* Sade will write: *are plants and animals acquainted with mercy, pity ... brotherly love?* (888)

Sade, always paradoxical, offers up this curiosity; he both despises the church and its stultifying myths, yet climbs into bed with a churchy arsenal of crucifixes and wafers and, when it comes to Nature, embraces with a vengeance the Catholic world view at its most extreme; an awkward backwardness for a man who was in so many ways a radical thinker — a champion of female sexuality, a vociferous detractor of the guillotine. In an earlier age the four libertines of Silling would have been witches.

I recall a story by the Belgian writer of fantasy, Jean Ray, in which a diabolical house — much like the Aztec universe — demands to be fed fresh corpses. Silling is such a place. And *ces messieurs* are famished; their

famishment, too, is cosmical. They would take on everything, even the weather:

*He passes an entire brothel in review; he receives the lash from all the whores while kissing the madame's asshole and receiving therefrom into his mouth both wind and rain and hailstones. (584)*

Such a madame, one supposes, can be nothing but the embodiment of Mother Nature.



When the four reach Silling, they destroy the bridge that allows them access and once inside decide

*... it were necessary ... to have walled shut all the gates, and all the passages whereby the chateau might be penetrated, and absolutely to enclose themselves inside their retreat as within a besieged citadel, without leaving the least entrance to an enemy, the least egress to a deserter ... They barricade themselves to such an extent there was no longer any trace of where the exits had been; and they settled down comfortably inside. (240-241)*

Tomb, gnostical world hermetically sealed, Silling is colonized like a defeated country, and like terrorized civilians its slaves are given two choices only: to be corrupted (some like certain survivors of Auschwitz become accomplices) or to submit. All resistance, imaginary and fabricated (the slaves are given emetics and forbidden to shit) is punished by torture and execution. Never does good resist evil; it is as if Sade cannot conceive it, as if helplessness and passivity serve as puissant aphrodisiacs. Then, again, the victims have always been figments only, flat, with no minds of their own. Silling, is, after all, a Looking Glass world; the world of the Red Queen

whose vassals are merely cards. Among the vast store of things the four friends have brought with them are *many mirrors*; Silling, you understand, is the mirror of our most acute failures: a city under siege, a country burning with no road leading out, a place of perfect moral isolation. If I have chosen to evoke Sade's sinister castle in this essay, it is not only because Silling's mirror of bloody ink affords an exhaustive inquiry into what a world ruled by killers is like, but because it is Silling's *banality*, after all, that should make us shudder, not its singularity.

Fantasy allows the reader to burn her own bridges and continue the tale *à sa guise*, to, in Sade's own words, *sprinkle in whatever tortures you like* (671). Silling is potentially everyman's fable, mirror, tomb. And if one has read *The 120 Days* to the bitter, the ironical end, has one at any moment been complicitous? Has one dared acknowledge and investigate this complicity? Has the reader sprinkled in whatever tortures she likes? Or was she made too ill to think and did she turn her head away in disgust? Fatal mistake! Or will she, will we, take up Silling's challenge and offer a refutation? One that does not entail *melting our enemies' cities*, as some fool recently proposed in *The Denver Post* — a jaded response that embraces Silling's vertiginous bestiality, Sade's own longing for cosmical conflagrations. What is needed, of course, is far less simple (and shall take much more than *a single glimmer of common sense!*); it depends upon a painful and necessary disentanglement from fatal habits of mind, a lasting and muscled recognition of common humanity, an ordered, a passionate vision for global justice, a veritable *setting to rights*. Compassion — for those the hottest heads among us choose to call, without knowledge or distinction “the enemy” — if it is to bring about peace, must be perceived as an active principle (unlike sentimentality which is, after all, simply another form of cowardice). In order to survive our next confrontation with Silling — the calamity we will suffer or inflict upon others, we will have to, each one of us, act in the manner Kant proposes and this if we are to, finally, overcome and abandon the pathology that dictates our unreason.

Silling, once seemingly so far is now very close. If Sade has been so vilified — and, despite the vagaries of fashion will continue to be, just as he always risks being embraced for all the wrong reasons — it is because Silling has

never been one man's uniquely aberrant vision, but a species of accelerated perspective, an anamorphosis that, when seen through the world's own looking glass, is recognizable. Silling, like Ground Zeros everywhere, like the killing fields that separate our country from our neighbor to the south, like our own densely populated penitentiaries, is simply another name for all our own worst mistakes. It is my conviction that had we dared read Sade rigorously, dared respond to the terrible questions he poses, we might have been prepared for the worst. Silling's fires continue to burn; they gather strength and momentum.



Many years ago (this was in 1965) I was invited to have tea with the French wife of the American consul in Algeria. She received me, her face slathered in cream, in a room across the street from a notorious prison. I suggested that living in such close proximity to a place where so many Algerians had been tortured during the war for independence must be a cause for much distress. But no; she told me she'd had a maid tortured there herself, for stealing silverware. "But then," she laughed, "I *found* the silverware!"

Needless to say, I didn't stay for tea but left at once to learn soon after that the maid had been tortured so severely she had been crippled. The soles of her feet had been beaten to a pulp with heavy rods — a method perfected by the thugs of Francoist Spain. The consul's wife's *allegresse* reminds me of those criminally vapid presidential debates when Bush spoke so gleefully of the death penalty. In Curval's words:

*Better everytime to fuck a man than seek to comprehend him. (496)*

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Rikki Ducornet's seventh novel, *Gazelle*, was published in cloth by Knopf in 2003 and in paperback by Anchor in 2004. She is currently working on a series of paintings inspired by alchemy and collections cabinets, and writing a novel about the Algerian War. She recently received the Lannan Award for Fiction (2004).

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