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The Philosopher's Writing Hand Potocki's *Manuscrit trouvée à Saragosse* and the Spectre

Here alone, I, in books form'd of metals,
Have written the secrets of wisdom,
The secrets of dark contemplation,
By fightings and conflicts dire
With terrible monsters Sin-bred
Which the bosoms of all inhabit,
Seven Deadly Sins of the soul.

William Blake, *The First Book of Urizen*

1.

Potocki's *Manuscrit*, like Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, or James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, examines the consistency and meaning of logos. This overwhelming philosophical task may seem surprisingly distant from a frivolously literary nature of the cited works, but it is precisely this paradox which is the first step towards opening the gates of the texts: we see their philosophical significance by struggling with the manifestly, if not arrogantly, literary character of the work. **Literature vis-à-vis philosophy is like a cry or sigh with regard to the articulated speech: it points and indicates without naming.** It calls and summons rather than instructs and pontificates. In brief, it is, as Blake would say in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "of the body", of the body in whose dark cavity or abyss resonates the voice of the soul liberated from the constraints of didacticism usually attached to soul's

pronouncements delivered “from above”. Thus, literature speaks from before philosophy, not because it merely chronologically precedes it, but because it goes beyond and below it; literature embraces philosophy. Thinking which chooses literature for its home is both more sublime and carnal than thinking which feeds on and of philosophy. Like Kant’s *Erhabene*, thinking which reverberates in literature presents “unboundedness”, what we will never find the adequate form for, although, at the same time, the sign character of literature imposes upon a desire and necessity of a form. Thinking in and through literature, the example of which we have in Potocki’s *Manuscript*, is of the imaginative, rather than the operational, type: “(...) our imagination, even in its greatest effort to do what is demanded of it and comprehend a given object in a whole of intuition (...), proves its own limits and inadequacy, and yet at the same time proves its vocation to obey a law, namely, to make itself adequate to that idea”.¹

2.

The order of literature is not that of philosophy. In the same way as the spectral world of the supernatural, either in its true horrifying (ir)reality or as a mock heroic theater of the human intrigue, haunts the house in which resides knowledge, literature intervenes in the discourse of philosophy. The general scenario of this intervention has been described by Jacques Derrida in his studies of the repeatableness of the sign which is an irreducible double of the truth which philosophy always wanted to see as unique and single. It is this secret and secretive, morganatic marriage of the truth and the sign bonded in and by writing which constitutes the romance of the Western *episteme*. When Derrida relates literature and philosophy the consequence of which is an impressive and painstaking effort at reading the history of philosophy as a history of several important metaphors, this is understandable as a turn towards and reenactment of the Romantic concept of *correspondences* which allow us both to reassert the differential character of things and see the connectedness

¹ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 98, 115.

as the vehicle not only of ontological but also of ethical character. Derrida's main correspondence is that between the head and the hand, i.e., between the concept and the sign. In later work, this bond replenishes as hospitality which establishes a link between the host and the invited and uninvited, hospitality as a welcoming acceptance (along the trail blazed by Nietzsche's version of *amor fati*) of that-which-comes, even – or primarily – when it comes uninvited.

3.

The theory of *correspondence* which energizes the Romantic thought and whose tenets we find in Swedenborg, Emerson, and Blake has the ethical edge since it is not a technical device allowing for linking distant objects and phenomena but an ethical push which makes us responsible for our own attitude and action towards distant objects. Thus, when *in correspondence* with the world, I myself become a distant partner, an absent addressee of a thing as a message *on its way* towards me. We accentuate the fact that the thing as a missive is underway because, in fact, it will always remain such, it will never be handed in to me because it is only as a distant party that I come into play in the game of *correspondence*. In this scheme of the exchange of messages I function as a distant and absent body and not as the ever-present soul. I – as a being which is a missive as well – also find myself *on the way* on which (as it frequently happens to letters) I am frequently intercepted by other parties, what is more, I am on the way the trajectory of which makes me more distant from the destination, and thus prevents the missive sent to “me” from reaching the addressee. The body is inspired by the fact that it is *on the road*, the epiphany revealed not only to Jack Kerouac but also to Nietzsche who, in *Ecce homo*, bans the souls from the play of inspired ideas: Der Leib is begeistert: lassen wir die ‘Seele’ aus dem Spiele,² and who considers *Sitzfleisch* a sin against the Holy Ghost.³ A trip through the Sierra Morena, as well as so many other vagrancies described in various subplots of *Manuscrit*, is not only a case of the literary

² F. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, in F. Nietzsche, *Werke in Drei Bänden* (Köln: Könneman, 1994), v. 3, p. 463.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

picaresque but, first of all, a rejection of the stability and caniness ascribed to the academic philosophical discourse. When van Worden travels through the wild landscape, he enters the territory where one abandons the inner sanctum of the established society for which *les philosophes* of the 18th century were dreaming a dream of perfectibility of man who, as Dr. Johnson puts it, “is softened” by civilization. Dr. Johnson’s analysis of the highlands of Scotland finds its completion in Potocki’s characterization of the Sierra Morena as uncivilized and “habitée par des contrabandiers, des bandits et quelques Bohémiens qui passaient pour manger les voyageurs”.⁴ Whereas Dr. Johnson ultimately finds retirement in the sophistication of urbanity and its philosophical debates leading to decisive conclusions, Potocki and his protagonist remain in the domain of vagrancy and undecidedness.

4.

The two narratives – the Gothic semi-articulate discourse of the spectre which invades our world in order to demonstrate the vanity of the human law, and the imperial speech of the king-philosopher whose ambition is to regulate everything, even that which (like the morganatic marriage) constitutes a violation of the letter of the law – weave the main thread of Potocki’s *Manuscrit*. On day eleventh, which the company spends at the cabbalist’s castle, Uzeda tells us two stories which indicate the basic polarity of the book. In the first one a dramatic event in the life of Menippus of Lycea offers a romantic background of the amorous infatuation for the intervention of the philosopher whose glance penetrates the veil of illusion. The other narrative presents the philosopher as the only champion of the rational which challenges the raging and hegemonic reign of the demonic supernatural. In both stories **the philosopher**, Apollonius and Athenagore respectively, **remains in a particular relationship or correspondence with the other**. In the former narrative the

⁴ J. Potocki, *La duchesse d’Avila (Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), p. 49. All quotations will come from this edition.

philosopher turns up as the one who sees what shuns and deludes the sight of others (“O beau jeune homme, vous caressez un serpent et un serpent vous caresse”, p. 189), in the latter he is the one who responds to the call of the ultimately other by following it not blindly however but “with the light” (“Il se leve, prend la lumiere et suit le phantôme”, p. 192). The philosopher is one who yields the light; nevertheless, the philosophical luminescence does not serve to disclaim the existence of the non-rational but just the opposite – it exposes its force and impact upon man’s world. When the philosopher approaches us with his/her candle, its shimmering light gives off even more shade than brightness.

5.

We cannot fail to notice, however, that the power of the philosopher is linked with the authority of the word. Apollonius disperses the veil of illusive prosperity with “a few words” (“Mais, aux paroles que prononça Apollonius, la vaisselle d’or et d’argent disparut”, p. 190), and the scene in which the force of the *logoi* is demonstrated is preceded by a characteristic reference to the book as the substitute of reality: when asked whether they saw Tantalus’ gardens which “are and are not” the wedding guests answer that they “saw them in Homer because they never descended to hell” (“Nous les avons vus dans Homer, car nous ne sommes point descendus aux enfers”, p. 189). Two things may be said about this question and response. First, that the philosopher makes his point by turning towards what has been already told or written down (the story of Tantalus and his cruel punishment was an irreducible part of the Greek lore); hence, philosophy approaches vital problems of being via a detour of literature or narration as if the word of philosophy had to borrow its weight from the word of a tale. Second, in a significant act of a decision the audience respond not by saying that they “read” about Tantalus’ gardens in Homer, but that they “saw” them in the works of this author, indicating through this collusion of sensual order the fact that the force of the word of the tale – which makes it such a desirable help for philosophy – resides in its ability to call things into

being. The listeners' response is doubly intriguing because not only do they testify to the creative/evocative power of the word of the tale, but also ascribe to it an even more powerful energy of presencing what does not exist. The word of the tale makes us see things which "are and are not"; it is at the origin of a certain illusion, but when philosophy wants to perforate the bubble of pretence, it takes recourse precisely to the word of the tale which now acquires a different power: it quotes itself, re-cites its own example, shows the secret of its machinery to expose the trick. The problem however remains: **the trick of the word of the tale can be compromised by another trick of the same word.** The machinery of Potocki's text belongs to the same branch of textual technology which has produced Sterne's masterpiece. In the first volume of *Tristram Shandy* we learn that the work is energized by two operations seemingly at variance with each other. One movement denies the other but the act of negation is also a pact of reconciliation which, without cancelling the original polemical contrariness of both motions, makes the text move on. Sterne himself renders it in the following way: "By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too, – and at the same time".⁵ In William Blake's terms, we are stepping on the territory where the difference between the negation and the contrary is meditated on. In the famous passage from the 40th plate of *Milton* we read in the appropriately Gothic rhetoric the basic tenets of Western thinking which oscillates between the "Reasoning Power" of regulatory, operational thought on the one hand and inspirational dictate of imagination on the other: "There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary: / the Negation must be destroyed to redeem the Contraries. / The Negation is the Spectre, the Reasoning Power in Man: / This is a false Body, an Incrustation over my Immortal / Spirit, a Selfhood which must be put off & annihilated away" (ll. 32-36). **The magical art which has perfected the use of these tricks of digression and progression, which negotiates its way between the "Negation" and the "Contrary", is called philosophy.**

⁵ L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, G. Petrie, ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 95.

6.

Philosophy repels the spectral with the apotropaic force (which in *Manuscrit* is frequently a “farce”) of literature. We could say of Potocki what a critic says of Derrida that “the counterviolence he wished to oppose to Western thought was related to the study of literature”.⁶ Athenagore extends this use of the word over writing: *écriture* becomes a weapon against what does not exist and only pretends to be, what “is and is not”, i.e., against itself. Left alone at night in the abandoned haunted house the philosopher must resist the anarchic play of imagination, and the way to do it is by writing: “Lui, craignant que son imagination trop libre n’aille, au gré d’une crainte frivole, se figurer de vaines fantômes, applique son esprit, ses yeux et sa main à écrire” (p. 192). Writing is clearly an exorcism but not so much against supernatural apparitions as against one’s own imagination; by writing I hold in check not only the work of my imagination but also desire and fear. With a pen in hand I can desist the intrusion which threatens me from the inside rather than from the outside; the danger of imagination originates in its not being able to resist the frivolity and vanity of the desire which tends towards strong effects, i.e., towards terror. It is this combination of liking (*gré*), a suspected lightness (*frivole*), and fear (*crainte*) which constitutes a true danger which the philosopher must be aware of. In other words, **imagination exposes us to a serious peril because instead of writing fear it experiences it; imagination – as “illiterate” – is a subversive and unruly citizen of the republic of the human subject.**

7.

Thus, on the one hand, we can claim that writing turns its sharp edge against fear, but, on the other hand, we must observe that one who writes does it precisely **out of** fear. Athenagore looks for a pen alarmed, *craignant*, and anxiety seems to be unavoidable. It is only from within terror that *écriture* wants to repel it. Already terrified,

⁶ A. Bass, “The Double Game: An Introduction”, in J. Smith, W. Kerrigan, eds., *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 68.

we grasp a pen in order not to fall victim to radical trepidation. Anxiety rules over philosopher who is the one who initiates a crusade against the terrifying. The repetitiveness of fear is not incidental, it is not merely a loss of nerve that is at stake here. Rather, Athenagore's entrapment in the enchanted circle of alarm from which he starts and to which he returns focuses our attention upon the sublime. If Edmund Burke is right in his claim that the sublime is the most powerful emotion we can feel and its source is traceable to terror, then the philosopher's reaction (in fear he writes in order to scare away fear) is both a denial and approval of the sublime. To put it differently, philosophy, particularly its enlightened version, wanted to do away with or to marginalize the sublime, but **the discourse of philosophy is where the sublime returns in a spectral form**. Repelling the sublime by the rejection of a fearful play of imagination, the philosopher invites it by his confession that he writes out of and in fear (*craignant*). When Burke writes "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling",⁷ the reader of Potocki's *Manuscrit* wants to supplement this claim by saying that by attempting to tame fear the philosopher conceives of the yet stronger emotion. **Philosophy wishes to discover, by writing, the sublimated sublime, the over-sublime**. Athenagore, the only man who can brave the ghost, is a parodic version of the *Übermensch* of the *Über-sublime*, or *Über-Erhabene*.

8.

The philosopher, Potocki tells us, is one who follows the ghost with a lamp (*prend la lumière et suit le fantôme*), and this lamp which is far from dispersing darkness is the same flame which illuminates pages of the philosopher's writing. Moving into the haunted house, Athenagore prepares to front the spectre by ordering a bed, a lamp,

⁷ E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1812), p. 58.

and pads which will carry his writing (“Il se loge dans la maison, et sur le soir il ordonne qu’on lui dresse sons lit (...), qu’on lui apporte ses tablettes et de la lumière (...)”, p. 191). The philosopher burns the midnight oil because he/she needs this light to struggle with the spectres which he/she inadvertently calls in. Not only do we see it in *Faust*, but already in Milton’s “Il Penseroso” where the philosopher’s lamp is seen “at midnight hour” illuminating his solitary discourse with “thrice great Hermes” and debates with “daemons that are found / In fire, air, flood, or under ground”. Yet the hand is as important as the flame. When the spectre approaches accompanied by the jarring noise of rattling chains, the philosopher opposes to this cacophony two things: the scratching of a writing pen, and attention concentrated upon the very act of writing. Borrowing from Milton’s “Hymn on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” we could say that **the “horrid clang” of “old Dragon under ground” is counteracted by the “angelic symphony” and “silver chime” of *écriture*.**

9.

The task of the philosopher is loyalty to one’s hand and pen. It is this probity and devotion to the hand that comes into play in the moment of the ultimate test. As we learn from Potocki, when the ghost approaches the philosopher’s study, he does not abandon the pen, but more forcefully turns his attention inside: “Il ne lève point les yeux, il ne quitte point sa plume, se rassure et s’efforce, pour ainsi dire, de ne point entendre” (p. 192). When faced by the “old Dragon” from “under ground” the philosopher does not raise his eyes and holds on to his pen which strategies are meant to strengthen the focus of his attentive glance upon himself. The theatrics of attentiveness are meaningful; meditative assiduity demonstrates itself by the three attachments: to oneself (*de ne point entendre*), to the studious look at the page (*il ne lève point les yeux*), and to the pen (*il ne quitte point sa plume*). Writing belongs then to a repertory of gestures which, like a careful glance upon a page and introspective sight, repels the spectre by ignoring it, by not noticing it, by not paying attention or, rather, by merciless exhausting one’s attentiveness upon something else so that the ghost cannot find any place in my attention.

If writing is to function as an exorcism, it must be performed in a meditative mood which makes it exempt from the approaches of panic and fear. This is an idealistic principle since, as we have noticed, the writer begins his work already invaded by anxiety; thus, *écriture* is a domain in which one ghost repels and exorcises another because only as already haunted by a spectre do I have a chance to successfully act as an exorcist.

10.

The play of hands does not end so quickly. In fact, Potocki sketches three different gestures and positions. First, there is the initial position of the philosopher who never puts his pen aside and whose fingers are collected around the writing tool. Second, there is the spectre's hand which, and we may have easily let this go unnoticed, is not free but remains bound by chains. The spectral and demonic comes with a fettered hand to signal a desire to threaten and annoy (the acoustic aspect of chains) as well as a wish to be delivered from oppression. When the ghost meets the philosopher, Potocki tells us, the bound met the free, the enslaved wants to summon the attention of the liberated. The phantom beckons Athenagore with his finger – “Le spectre était debout et l'appelait du doigt” (p. 192). The parodic effect of the scene relies upon this contrast: on the one hand, there is all the seriousness of imprisonment the reasons of which we know and will know nothing of. The existential guilt which defies rational explanation, the sign of Cain which Potocki meditates upon in his extended version of the Jew Eternal Wanderer, the character which rambles through the pages of Romantic literature beginning with C.F.D. Schubart's 1783 *Der ewige Jude*. We read that the spectre's walk is slow under the weight of chains: “Le fantôme marchait d'un pas lent, comme si le poids des chaines l'eut accablé” (p. 192). On the other hand, the frivolousness of the bent finger (*du doigt*) which beckons the philosopher in the semi-intimate, semi-seductive gesture the lightness and vanity of which stands in direct opposition to the arm locked in heavy fetters.

11.

The gesture of the finger compromises the spectre but also points at its seductive powers: **when deprived of speech, when denied the grace of articulation, the ghost can only waver between the threat and seduction.** The man of the world, like *chevalier* van Worden, responds to the latter, and hence the importance of the spectral eroticism so evident on the pages of the *Manuscrit*. The eroticism of spectres which unobservedly metamorphoses into the sphere of the dream as if to confirm and emphasize the fact that ghosts are already well established within us. We need to carefully note the chronology of spectral appearances. While at midnight the philosopher, a pen in hand, stubbornly focuses his eyes upon his writing pad to scare away the phantom, the man of the world despite the lugubrious sound of the midnight bell (“son tintement me semblait avoir quelque chose de lugubre”, p. 56) opens his arms in order to embrace. What the philosopher refuses to see (we have to remember that he “does not raise his eyes”) is the seductivity of the spectral to which he/she wants to remain immune. Van Worden, who is a negation of the philosopher, enjoys eroticism and seduction but, at the same time, is aware of its potentially spectral character. While the philosopher remains deaf to the call of the spectrally erotic, van Worden begins by responding to its impact remembering, however, its inherent dangers. A sophisticated sartorial phantasy of the Day First episode (“Le corset richement brodé en perle (...), Leurs bras nus étaient ornés de bracelets (...)”, p. 56) designs the elaborate scheme of confusion – one is placed on the threshold separating, but in the extremely ineffective manner, the spectral and the real, the material and the immaterial. Spectrality of eroticism in which literature relishes depends upon this oscillation between the polarities: what begins as a mere show of the power of darkness turns into a social occasion but inadvertently the latter can also be turned into the former. Thus, what begins as lugubrious turns out to be almost innocent and certainly inviting (“la porte de la chambre s’ouvrit, et je vis entrer une figure toutes noire, mais non pas effrayant, car c’était une belle négresse demi-nude”, p. 56); but what promises merely an infernal temptation shifts into a distinctly physical pleasure (“(...) l’esprit de ténèbres (...) cherchait à me faire succomber par l’amour de l’or.

Mais les deux beautés se rapprochèrent de moi, et il me semblait bien que je touchais des corps et non pas des esprits”, p. 67). Van Worden’s position is echoed in Finnegan’s plight at the beginning of chapter VI of Joyce’s *oeuvre* in which Finnegan, besieged by two girls, remains (like van Worden) suspended in the aporetic world of the twilight zone between dream and waking consciousness, death and life; “the besieged bedreamt him still and solely of those lililiths undeveiled which had undone him, gone for age, and knew not the watchful treachers at his wake, and theirs to stay”.⁸ The anxiety of Potocki’s protagonist over the identity of the seductive females, their mysterious and terrifying ability to be, at the same time, exciting and repelling forms the core of Finnegan’s concern: “besieged” referring to harsh reality is however modified by “bedreamt” which in one word combines the dream with the acted out erotic phantasy (“bed”). The feminine is both domesticated through a reduction to its either childcaring function or effeminacy of being and radicalized through its diabolical powers (“lililiths” which refers simultaneously to the demonic *Ewig Weibliche* of Lilith as well as to a sing-song lullaby quality – “lili” and a pseudo-talk used by adults with regard to children). Like Emina and Zibelda, the women are both teachers and deceivers (“treachers”), mistresses of knowledge and deception, of doing and un-doing (“undone him”), and their *negligée* belongs as much to the repertory of the theatre of the erotic as to the cosmic drama of the ultimate unconcealment of the devilish force. Both Finnegan and van Worden are “besieged” by the phantomatic which in an instant (one could speak then about the insta-phanto-matic) oscillates between the devilish seduction of transparent veiling and the seaming counteraction which tries to de-demonize the seductive (in the ninth chapter of *Finnegans Wake* we read about “a fammished devil”⁹ which refers both to the proximity of the satanic and the feminine and to the ascetic element of control and rejection of such a temptation: the devil is both “famished” and “femm[e]ished”), to reduce it to the human dimension of nakedness which ambition, however, when achieved only reconfirms the phantomatic character of the power in question (the women are “undeveiled”: a complex portmanteau word which speaks of the devil

⁸ J. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

who energizes the feminine but also of an attempt to reduce Satan's potential – the women are un-deveiled, i.e., removed from the influence of dark forces. "Undeveloping" also focuses upon the oscillation between veiling and unveiling but the ultimate result of the process remains in the state of Sternian "fertile confusion", since the double negation of the "de-" and "un-" leaves us in a state of undecision). Several episodes in *Manuscrit* featuring crossdressing extend this state of indecision over the question of the ego which now is shown as transcending the strict borders of genders, the situation which Joyce fronts with the line "I is a feminine person".¹⁰

12.

Philosophy intuits and shuns the erotic in the spectral as the phantom defies the force of definition and prevents us from even determining and naming the ghostly; literature, which narrates the adventures of van Worden (we may muse over the etymology of the name which designates our *chevalier* to be a "man of words"), senses the spectral in the erotic as a play and dance (see the accomplished dancing performance in Day First) of fluid forms. Athenagore, as if he were a distant disciple of Strauss, considers scepticism, not faith, the task of the philosopher. It is not incidental that the stories take place in ancient Greece, as in the domain of philosophy Athens triumph over Jerusalem the loyalty to which is the war cry of van Worden. When his beautiful and seductive cousins want him to part with the necklace containing fragments of the Holy Cross, van Worden reiterates his staunch creed of loyalty: "J'ai promis à ma mère de ne le point quitter et je tiens mes promesses" (p. 136).

Yet the hand does not leave our field of observation. The philosopher repels the seduction by nervously holding on to his pen; van Worden holds cups and bodies. In the dream closing Day First the erotic phantasy of *des séraills d'Afrique* presents everything which the philosopher wants to repress and avoid by not abandoning his pen. The hand clutching the writing instrument wants to follow thinking rather than the ghost, to work amidst permanent forms

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 251.

rather than among the metamorphic, changing flow of *douces alternatives*. What is more, the philosopher lights his lamp (which must be compared against the semi-nude negresse's *flambeau*) and nervously scribbles on his writing pad in order not to fall asleep. A betrayal of the hand, the relaxation of the grip upon the pen would mean succumbing to the oneiric domain which changes the logic of philosophy into the logic of desire. The hand no longer serves as a writing machine but now is a device of embrace (“Je me sentais rêver, et j’avais cependant la conscience de ne point embrasser des songes”, p. 69); the thought is no longer related to the human hand but in the process of de-volution of the dangerous, spectral regress is reduced to the bird’s wing – in his dream van Worden’s thoughts travel to the seraglios of Africa and their delights on the wings of desire: “ma pensée, emportée sur l’aile des désirs, malgré moi, me plaçait au milieu des sérails d’Afrique (...)” (p. 69). One should carefully weigh the two words – *malgré moi*; **the flying thought of desire, which in its regressive flight does not fear the spectrally erotic, eventually will result in a dramatic reduction and diminishing of the subject**. This is precisely what the philosopher desperately wants to avoid by introspectively turning upon himself. Nothing should happen to the philosopher, the man of writing as opposed to the man of words, beyond, despite, or even against his will and decision. It is not surprising then that the philosopher does not ultimately give in to the seductive beckoning of the finger but to the discordant noise of dangling shackles. He responds only after the spectre rattles his chains again: “Le spectre recommence son fracas avec ses chaînes (...)” (p. 192).

13.

We cannot shake the philosopher’s hand and leave him to his writing pads yet. In act two of the drama of writing which demonstrates its apotropaic force against the spectre, the philosopher raises the hand but not in order to establish a communicative link with the phantom; the writer makes a sign with his hand to impose his time, the time of *écriture*, upon the supernatural guest. He raises his hand to make the spectre wait and, more importantly, to gain more time for more writing. Potocki writes: “Athénagore lui fait signe de la main de

l'attendre un peu et continue à écrire comme si de rien n'était" (p. 192). The philosopher has monopolized writing in order to, at least for a short while, dictate his own conditions to the world, to freeze possible interventions and criticisms. The stretched out hand of a writing philosopher is a gesture of withholding and stopping that which is approaching to disturb the philosopher's peace by severely criticising his work, passing judgment on his *écriture*. Thus, the spectre which appears to the philosopher in Potocki's story is the apparition of a critic who, if we follow the ironic lead of Shaftesbury, counts among "dreadful spectres, the giants, the enchanters, who traverse and disturb them [writers, T.S.] in their work".¹¹ As we learn from Shaftesbury's "Advice to an Author" **we can project the image of the hand and see it transform into the figure of the preface or dedication which, extends itself outside the main body of the text and thus protruded acts as the apotropaic gesture repelling critics.** Here is Shaftesbury: "To judge indeed of the circumstances of a modern author by the pattern of his prefaces, dedications, and introductions, one would think that at the moment when a piece of his was in hand, some conjuration was forming against him, some diabolical powers drawing together to blast his work and cross his generous design. He therefore rouses his indignation, hardens his forehead, and with many furious defiances and 'Avaunt-Satans!' enters on his business (...)"¹² To write a preface is to extend an arm, a pen in hand, to discourage, but also at the same time to demonize, criticism which is now turned, as any hegemonic power does with its opponents, into "some diabolical powers".

Writing wants primarily to continue to keep its own hold upon reality, and this desire to go on scribbling is so strong that it wishes to ignore everything that does not belong to its realm; even when the ghost has already arrived the philosopher continues writing as if nothing happened, "as if nothing was there". It is this negligence of "nothing" which is characteristic of *écriture*. We must read Potocki's phrase *comme si de rien n'était* literally: "nothing" (*rien*) has, in fact, (im)materialized, "nothing" has come to front the philosopher both visually and

¹¹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, J. Robertson, ed. (Indianapolis, New York: Bobbs and Merrill, 1964), p. 150.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

acoustically, and through the force of writing the philosopher chooses to ignore it, instead of scrutinizing the extraordinary revelation he remains immersed in his own text thus betraying a true vocation of thinking which struggles with and harks back to the call of the powerful No (*das machtende Nein*, as Nietzsche names it) of nothing. **The glance of the philosopher does not practice violence, does not vehemently repel or ostracize but, as if it were a species of etherizing Gorgon, turns the opponent into an immaterial, transparent apparition and moves on as if “there was nothing” at its end.**¹³

14.

While literature passionately embraces the (im)material phantomatic body (“Emina me remercia de ma docilité et m’embrassa d’un air fort tendre. Ensuite Zibeddé colla sa bouche sur la mienne (...)”, p. 68), philosophy, metaphorically and literally, turns it back upon the spectral. It does not want to see the sign given by the phantom and accept its invitation. Potocki clearly indicates the topography of the scene: the philosopher sits at the table, bent over the writing pad, with his back towards the door at which there stands the spectre. We read that the philosopher “turned round” (*se retourne*), and only then did he see the beckoning sign of the ghost repetitively summoning him with the finger (*on l’appelle du doigt encore une fois*). As the final episode of the story demonstrates, philosophy’s reluctance towards the phantomatic is indicative of its tentativeness and abstention from undertaking saving efforts. **Writing is what distances man from a danger, what introduces spacing between me and the other who is always a form of a risk and peril;** the hand holding a pen cannot, at the same time, act as a saving hand.

15.

Spacing, one of the factors which make repetitiveness of the sign possible, introduces an interval which interrupts the continuity of sign

¹³ For a description of such a look the reader may consult J.L. Marion’s, *Dieu sans l’être. Hors-texte* (Paris: Fayard, 1982).

production. Without this intervention of blankness no articulation would be conceivable, and thus nothing could be brought to the court of reason without the white which is what makes one sign function as a witness of the appearance of another. A matrimonial rhetoric of the romance could hold that spacing is where the white marriage between signs takes place, i.e., where signs are set next to each other and yet keep the distance which allows them to preserve their independence. To remain within the reach of our reigning metaphor we could say that signs organize themselves, help one another to arrange themselves in some order out of fear of the spectre of the non-sign, of the dead sign which has arisen from the dead in a white shroud, a most typically spectral garment. Hence, **Potocki's *Manuscrit as a book in which ghosts and apparitions feature prominently must necessarily center on spacing, i.e., on the white realm of interruption.***

16.

Manuscrit invites us to a series of displacements which, on the one hand, blind us to the text as a certain purposeful whole, but, on the other hand, emphasize its visibility as a sequence of discontinuous narratives. Potocki's work is an accelerator which spills a literary whole into atoms of tales, and thus verges on the border over which order looks straight into the abyss of chaos, which is yet another name of the spectre, or of the *revenants*, *brigands*, *contrabandistes* who appear in the very first paragraph of the text. We also have to remember that chaos is another name of a monster or infernal ghost: "Suspense, unboundedness, indeterminacy: one of their abiding images is the monster, and one of their abiding myths, Chaos".¹⁴ As we move on in a geographic and textual trip over the mountains of Sierra Morena we feel more and more disconnected from the tradition of teleology of the text and hermeneutics as the art of exposing the objects and intentions of the word. That the manuscript itself is found in a detached house on a side, peripheral street ("m'étant avancé vers un lieu un peu écarté", p. 47) suggests that

¹⁴ W. Kerrigan, "Atoms Again: The Deaths of Individualism", in *Taking Chances...*, p. 86.

its fate is bound with detours and circuitous wanderings. Velásquez's complaint in the Day XXVIII episode that he does not know who actually is speaking and who is listening leads us straight to a **topographic metaphor of a labyrinth**. When Velásquez, a pedantic and properly absent-minded mathematician and philosopher, places himself in a narrative maze, he echoes Lawrence Sterne's reader's anxious response to a situation of one lost in a desert of digressions. Having explained to the annoyed reader that *Tristram Shandy* "is a history-book of what passes in man's own mind", Sterne goes on to claim that it is precisely the "confusion" which is the central point of this history and thus that the scientific and scholarly machinery of causes and effects will be ruled out from his text: "Now you must understand that not one of these was the true cause of the confusion in my uncle Toby's discourse; and it is for that very reason I enlarge upon them so long, after the manner of great physiologists – to shew the world what it did *not* arise from".¹⁵ The metaphor of the labyrinth is thus crucial for, at least, two reasons. First, it delays, if not cancels, the idea of the center and destination; second, it imposes both upon the teller and listener the duty of re-starting, re-initiating, thus questioning the very idea of beginning which, to fill its semantic mission, must be single. In Sterne's terminology, the text becomes "a fertile source of obscurity". Joyce echoes with Finnegans, the builder of the tower of stories, "one thousand and one stories, all told" high, which however always collapses burying the listeners but also enforcing the necessity of a new (re)construction in a manner which parallels the resurrection of a dismembered god, "a rouseruction of his bogey".¹⁶

17.

A story which does not begin or end but weaves itself on in the continuous process of telling reflects the motif of the travel which (dis)organizes *Manuscrit*. Thus, such a story, deprived of the sheltering solicitude of the end, bereft of the inn of ending, betrays

¹⁵ L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions...*, pp. 107–108.

¹⁶ J. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake...*, pp. 5, 499.

the principle of hospitality. The reader is not protected by the conclusive ending, does not find reassurance in the finality of telling, but is being surprised, astonished by sudden interventions of other voices and disturbing presences. Potocki begins by sketching a sublime landscape in which man cannot seek hospitality: “Le voyageur qui se hasardait dans cette sauvage contrée s’y trouvait (...) assailli par mille terreurs capables de glacer les plus hardis courages. Il entendait des voix lamentables se mêler au bruit des torrents at aux sifflements de la tempête, des lueurs trompeuses l’égarèrent, et des mains invisibles le poussaient vers des abîmes sans fond” (p. 49). This is a land where residence is, as we have learned, impossible, and *auberges isolées* have either been abandoned or turned into places where hospitality has been supplanted by hostile operations of the spectral. The movement from Day First to Day Second establishes the pattern of the book: it is a text on the broken promise of hospitality which subsumes both the disappointed curiosity of the reader who is prevented from reaching the inn of the conclusion and suppressed philosophical belief in the solidity of the meaning of signs and things. The moment in which van Worden wakes up and finds himself not in the *auberge* but between the corpses of the Zoto brothers at the foot of the gallows is a moment of crisis of the reliability of thinking: one can no longer rely upon the continuity of one’s relationship with things of and in space. What was one thing in the evening turns out to be another in the morning, forcing us to face two possibilities: either things and spatial locations are bereft of solid positioning, or the human subject is not a continuous one, changes from moment to moment, and does not preserve the memory of what is happening to him/her in between two moments. As Derrida says concerning Stirner, “this Ego, this living individual would itself be inhabited and invaded by its own specter. It would be constituted by specters which it becomes the host and which it assembles in the haunted community of a single body. Ego = ghost. Therefore ‘I am’ would mean ‘I am haunted’; I am haunted by myself who am (haunted by myself who am haunted by myself who am ... and so forth)”.¹⁷

¹⁷ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 133.

18.

Hence, the polarity of *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* is that between the uncertain and vague positions which cannot be properly mapped; spanned between the (re)beginning and (never)ending, with both notions thus under erasure, the text neither begins nor ends leaving us in a state of indecision and intellectual confusion. A fragment from the final section of Day Fifth will provide us with a good example of this strategy. “Comme Zoto en était à cet endroit de l’histoire de son père, un de ses frères vint lui dire qu’on demandait des ordres au sujet de l’embarquement. Il nous quitta donc, en nous demandant la permission de reprendre le lendemain le fil de son récit. Mais ce qu’il avait dit me donnait beaucoup à penser. Il n’avait cessé de vanter l’honneur, la délicatesse, l’exacte probité de gens à qui l’on aurait fait grâce de les pendre. L’abus de ces mots, dont il se servait avec tant de confiance, brouillait toutes mes idées” (p. 119). When the story is about to end, it is suspended, and thus an ending becomes no more than a promise of a new beginning which, in turn, will not be *new* as it will merely hark back to what has already “ended”. As we read in the text, the thread of the narrative will not be started but only “retaken” (*re-prendre*). The teller of the tale departs but even this parting is not quite “final” since we know that he will return the next day (*lendemain*) and, what is more, his parting itself is implicated in another act of departure; Zoto parts in order to part, but this double parting is not more but less decisive as we know that he will come back only to promise yet another act of departure (at the end of Day Sixth he interrupts his tale again promising to continue “tomorrow”, “demain”, p. 135). The tale is always “to be continued” which informs us of the priority of the series and sequence over the completed whole.

19.

In fact, the very frame of *Manuscrit* implies a whole series of deferring gestures as if tales which constitute the book were subject to the postal principle “as differential-deferring relay that regularly prevents, delays, dispatches the deposition of the thesis, that

prohibits all repose and incessantly deposes, deports and keeps the movement of speculation on the run".¹⁸ First, the narrator cannot, in fact, read the text which only whets his curiosity by particular words the narrator can understand: "c'était un manuscrit en espagnol; je ne connaissais que fort peu cette langue, mais, cependant, j'en savais assez pour comprendre que ce livre pouvait être amusant: on y parlait de brigands, de revenants, de cabalistes (...)" (p. 47). We only know that the text which we are just about to be told was no more than a promise of an unusual story (*roman bizarre*), and that it remained a closed book to the narrator who had to withhold his interest and suspend its fulfilment till some later moment. The second deferral is thus due to the necessity of translation (*je le priais de me traduire cet ouvrage en français*), and the third results from the inevitable transition from the aural to the written (*Je l'écrivis sous sa dictée*).

The story belongs to the order of patience whereas the quotidian has the irresistible urgency that cannot be put off or pacified. The story is interrupted by everyday life concerns which signals that the tale-telling must always withdraw before what cannot be delayed and postponed. Interrupting his narrative on Day Sixth Zoto says: "Je suis obligé de vous quitter, le gouvernement de ma caverne exige des soins attentifs auxquels je ne puis me refuser" (p. 135). One abandons the story because one is called by the politics of the everyday, by the *gouvernement de ma caverne*, and this appeal is so strong that it cannot be resisted (*je ne puis me refuser*). The narrative gives in to the ethical obligation of attentive care, *soins attentifs*, which speak with the overwhelming and irresistible force. The story remains unfinished for two reasons: first, it capitulates to the larger order of the day which very clearly does not recognize the importance of the narrative and whose order is different from the order of the tale; second, the tale suspended so that we could pay our dues to the everyday now turns out to be a troublesome gift as it shakes the very foundations of the quotidian. By interrupting the story we demonstrate both solicitude and criticism towards the world. The narrative is a giving force which must temporarily suspend its operations in order to create space and time in which the gift will start working. In fine, it is a force which gives food to our thought (*ce*

¹⁸ J. Derrida, *La carte postale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), p. 61.

qu'il avait dit me donnait beaucoup à penser) as a subversive, destabilizing agency. Having listened to the now interrupted narrative of Zoto van Worden's ideas are "dimmed" (*brouillait toutes mes idées*), and his notions of virtue and justice become much less absolute ("J'avouais ne pouvoir refuser une sorte d'estime à des hommes aussi courageux que ceux qu'il me dépeignait", p. 136).

20.

If thinking owes its subversive force to interruptions and hindrances the movement of which causes the ground of ideas to shake, the ambition of absolute hegemony, of one who wants to claim total power over me, will be to reintroduce the order of continuity. Tyranny defies discontinuity as it can always turn itself into a hiding place, a subterranean residence of revolt and anarchy. The caverns of gypsies in Potocki's text are such extended versions of the fissures in the structure of the text which dislocate its center. Nowhere is the emphasis placed by the absolutist on continuity more striking than in the grotesque fragment of Giulio Romati's narrative dealing with the princess de Monte-Salerno. The phantom lady whose purpose is to seduce the young man with the intimidating show of opulence and beauty begins to tell her story on condition of *not* being interrupted. When Giulio reacts with surprised *Qui? vous, Madame?* to her introducing herself as a daughter of the last prince of Monte Salerno, the spectre replies with an angry reminder of her sovereignty: "Je voulais dire la Princesse de Mont-Salerno. Mais ne m'interrompez plus" (p. 220). The spectral, as any hegemonic system, does not wish to be interrupted because such a spacing can disclose and compromise the repertory of tactical moves which secure the position of the master. The humble and innocent question asked by Romati disconcerts the spectre because it bares its self-imposed identity, shows – in a very telling form "I wanted to say", *je voulais dire*, which rhetorically unconceals what the phantom is mentally desperately unwilling to reveal – the vanity of the subject position. It is not a coincidence that, on the one hand, Romati's questions touch upon the nature of the princess' identity and that, on the other hand, her responses show a growing dislike of being interrupted. The more

exposed to hindrances the hegemonic agency is, the more it is likely to lose its power. Thus, when asked to confirm that her servant girls were made to obey all her desires, the spectre responds with “Je vous avais prié de ne point m’interrompre”, which she ejects with obvious annoyance – “reprit-elle avec un peu d’humeur” (p. 221). The phrase is repeated at least once more in the tale and at one point it is transformed in a straightforward act of censorship. When Romati calls her life a “paradise on earth”, the apparition responds with a staunch ban: “Romati, je vous avais prié de ne plus vous servir de cette expression” (p. 224). The discontinuous, the cavernous, the subterranean which belongs to the nomadic tribe of gypsies is also what opposes the censoring power of the continuous and hegemonic the purpose and function of which is to “teach us a lesson” (“Romati, rappelez-vous toute votre vie de ce que vous avez vu ici”, p. 225) and tattoo us with the traces of its might (“Je relevais ma manche, et je vis effectivement mon bras tout brûlé et les marques des cinq doigts de la Princesse”, p. 226).

Tadeusz Ślawek

Pisząca ręka filozofa

Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie Potockiego i sprawa widma

Streszczenie

Autor podejmuje próbę odczytania dzieła Potockiego jako dialogu między narracją a dyskursem filozoficznym. Podobnie jak w Sterne’owskim *Tristramie Shandy* mechanizm tekstu Potockiego polega na stałym napięciu między przymusem posuwania narracji naprzód, a jednoczesnym jej wstrzymywaniem przez liczne dygresje i labiryntowe zwroty opowieści układających się w strukturę „szkatułkową”. Filozofia poświęca swoje wysiłki nazywaniu, porządkowaniu, definiowaniu rzeczywistości; literatura w swym wymiarze narracyjnym staje się terenem działania wyobraźni, która zajmuje się tym, co definiowaniu wymyka się, a zatem temu, co prowadzi egzystencję widmową, co jest w porównaniu z jasnymi i pełnymi bytami filozofii jedynie duchem i cieniem. Stąd zainteresowanie literatury nie tylko motywami gotyckimi, lecz także pustą przestrzenią, spacją oddzielającą, przerywającą ciąg słów tworzących narrację. Stąd też nagle zatrzymania historii opowiadanych przez Potockiego i niedokończony ich charakter jako opowieści pozbawionych pointy. Narracja Sterne’a i Potockiego swoim przerywanym, nieciągłym

tokiem staje się w ten sposób siłą moderującą i korygującą nie tylko ambicje filozofii do wyrażenia „pełni” bytu, lecz także żywioł codziennego bytowania: gdy ten ostatni cechuje się niecierpliwością dążenia i osiągnięcia celów, narracja jest szkołą cierpliwości jako cnoty etycznej.

Tadeusz Ślawek

La main écrivante du philosophe
Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse de Jean Potocki et le cas du fantôme

R é s u m é

L'article est une tentative de lire l'oeuvre de Potocki comme un dialogue entre la narration et le discours philosophique. Comme dans *Tristram Shandy* de Sterne, le mécanisme du texte de Potocki consiste à maintenir une tension constante entre l'obligation de propulser la narration en avant et, parallèlement, la tendance à différer celle-ci par de nombreuses digressions et des retournements labyrinthiques des histoires qui forment une structure „à tiroirs”. La philosophie consacre ses efforts à nommer, à définir le réel; la littérature dans sa dimension narrative devient un champ d'action de l'imagination qui s'occupe de ce qui échappe à la définition et, partant, de ce qui mène une existence fantomatique, de ce qui, par rapport aux êtres distinctes et pleins de la philosophie n'est qu'un fantôme et une ombre. D'où l'intérêt que la littérature porte non seulement aux motifs gothiques, mais aussi à l'espace vide, au blanc entre les lignes du texte qui interrompt la suite de mots constituant la narration. Telle est également la cause de brusques arrêts des histoires relatées par Potocki et leur caractère inachevé en tant que récits dépourvus de pointe. Par ses interruptions, par sa discontinuité, la narration de Sterne et de Potocki devient ainsi une force qui modère et corrige non seulement les ambitions de la philosophie laquelle vise à exprimer la „plénitude” de l'être, mais aussi l'existence quotidienne: si cette dernière se caractérise par une course impatiente vers la réalisation de ses objectifs, la narration est par contre une école de patience considérée comme une vertu éthique.