

PURGE AND PLUNGE

a response to marion may campbell's konkretion

For my friend, Kinta

Pigment-loaded bristle brush, she wills her particular vermillion along as others' trajectories intersect and mesh, content for the moment to be a nano-element in this big abstracting machine of the city... (Campbell 2013a, 91)

IT'S A WINTER TEMPEST OUT THERE, *beyond the glass cage of the Sea Baths. In the small hot-box-of-a-bath swarming with bodies slowed down and expressionless, we are all addict and geriatric. We are cradled, buoyant babies, delighting quietly before the bubble jets, looking out past the drums of chemicals that line up the perimeter of this "therapeutic" experience—to the blustering, out of place, rogue day of Spring. Palm trees flex and bend and waves crash in from somewhere. Everything coming from somewhere else. Someone, who came all the way for the foreshore "experience" is shivering, licking an overpriced gelato on the sidewalk despite, perhaps in spite, of this wild weather. I can't help but imagine, my body submerged in the still heat of the therapeutic pool: brain freeze. I have come to think about how to begin my "creative response" to Marion May Campbell's exquisite novella, konkretion (2013). A page-less re-reading of sorts in this pool of soft warm saltwater, laced with just enough chemicals to give one a niggling itch, "itching to" begin (4). I look down to my finger-tips turned prune-like—and there is Campbell's image of the half head of "cabbage" alone in a pool of "beetroot juice", perhaps shrinking further back into its dehydrated crinkle, in Meinhof's fridge (54).*

Campbell's images set like concrete before loosening again and morphing into new possibilities. Within Campbell's gorgeously complex novella, several narrative trajectories lead the reader to embrace a critical imagination able to reflect upon Beigesang's "re-imagining" of Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin of the 1970s

Red Army Faction. However, to get to Beigesang's "re-imagining" the reader must journey via Monique Piquet, Beigesang's former teacher. Piquet's (*"prickly fleur-de-lyseé"*) meandering through Paris interweaves several narrative trajectories, including Piquet's "road trip" novel — in motion — "Driving Lessons" about "two gorgeous wild young girls" destined "to tear one another apart" (57, 5, 7).

The interconnected multiple narratives and host of literary devices, including parody, twist and turn, shift, interrupt — disrupt the interruption — writing-in the words of others — in particular the revolutionary poets and critical thinkers who shaped Piquet's radical past. However, through these disruptions, connections are made and fortified — questions emerge simultaneously from both content and form and never close over through to exhaustion. Campbell's *konkretion*, perhaps itself as "Wicked mesh... enabling corset to keep it all together", exposes and actively incorporates the critical imagination inherent to its creative momentum (4). Campbell's opening scene of Piquet at Charles de Gaulle airport, where "terminus doesn't feel like arrival" sparks a multiplicity of departures in motion (3).

Skeptical, guillotine witted Piquet journeys through Paris and through a transcript of an interview and audio file of Angel Beigesang on her new book "konkretion". Focusing on Meinhof's "leap into illegality" (44) — from passionate revolutionary resistance into terrorism — Beigesang considers that rather than terror...

What if writing had become practice for her, a movement through the body? A kind of street performance maybe, a super-charged rap, we might say now, calling for dance. She loved jazz. She loved to dance, you know. Where did bebopping, beehived Meinhof go, leaving this terrible, sloganeering monster in her place? Avoiding the terrible *either/or* trap; see-sawing from the labyrinthine syntax and Marxist rhetoric of the earnest journalist to the rude slang and collapsed grammar of a delinquent that she threw to her left-wing supporters in the Red Army manifesto. Trying to outdo Ensslin in vulgarity. Either way, the *either/or* of ventriloquy (45).

This contemplation of Beigesang's, however, is set within Campbell's broader complex textual spatiality. Throughout the novella are rich, brilliant, parody driven passages: "... our friend Luce (lips-all-over) Irigaray composing her ludic mimicry of male philosophers... We're sick of lacking even lack, we'll lack dance around you no more Papa Lacan, ladies' man though you may be", as well as passages demonstrating a genuine ardour for particular poets (20). Piquet, for example, "steps out... in some instinctive way ... to pay homage to Paul Celan", who "furthered Mallarme's extreme experiments, moving towards a poetry that can maroon the reader in heart-gripping stretches of silence..." (15).

Such trajectories are further layered with Piquet's contemplation of past radicalism

and also her concern for the dangerous and often destructive trap of idealising revolutionary icons-turned-commodity — legacies ultimately feeding back into the capitalistic machine they sought to disintegrate. Angel Beigesang, “whose name means parody, or what is sung alongside” (Campbell 2013b), is, amongst it all, described in her student days as “straddling the seminar chairs in her crumpled gunmetal linen pants-suit and apricot Indian shirt, shooting surrealist aphorisms back to her lecturer from under her Mao cap” (56-57).

Embedding the re-imagining of Meinhof and Ensslin within this broader and multi-layered complex textual space, Campbell is provoking the reader into a highly engaged contemplation of representations, language and revolution.

From the hot-tub to the steam room. I like to flirt with threshold and stay till I think, I think I'm going to pass out. Not knowing whether it's radiating from my own core or if it's the diffusion of the outside in. Either way, it's a meeting of the two drives. An overwhelming, delicious chemistry. It sounds more dangerous than it is. Besides, re-reading, in study or steam, is always a threshold affair. Someone else has come into this sweltering fog, a heavy-set woman in a red bathing suit, with a bucket of water to ramp up this effort. She has snuck in an exfoliation mitt. That's not allowed — abject skin cells falling like snowflakes — but this is a woman who has no doubt earned her credentials and no one's going to mess with her. She sits down, her face hinting a scowl. After a moment she gets up and splashes the bucket in a whooshing gush against some metal prong-hand-like thing jutting from the wall and the stream intensifies. I sit back and lull within the space of it. I think more about thresholds. Certain lines, images, seeds of Campbell's come back to me, especially from Beigesang's re-imagining:

Now it seems she's leaving the dream house in a perpetual state of pause.
She's got to sample this, the peace of crossing over to the irreversible.
A stasis welcomes her, like the hollow in the orgasm, the stillness in the eye
of it... (55)

Also, the multi-layered parody and irony:

Boogie. They tell me you used to love to boogie? Bopped
till you dropped? You turn, turn, turn, pleasure into pain,
that's the x-convent girl all over.
Faint in Jesus' shadow.
...
But here all is pastel all is peace—
calm calm
rub your hand over your Twiggy-small breasts
...

over all the peaks is peace
on every treetop
peace you trace scarcely a breath
in this womanly alcove
& on these boyish breasts
beguile yourself with softer things
a cashmere shrunken pull
on special now—
is really so Parisian (63, 73, 74)

However, after Piquet's experience of Beigesang's re-imagining of Ensslin and Meinhof:

The question returns: what triggers the conversion from resistance to terror, flick-knife or otherwise, the jump into illegality?—oh the primacy of praxis, that romance of struggle masking murder (88).

Piquet, transformed from “birdie bones” to a pulsating, activated “little red riding dot” determined to seek out “what remains”, is hoping to find the answer in “Meinhof's Bambule” (29, 91, 88-89). As Piquet journeys from point to point — dot-to-dot — sensation magnifies as the reader is drawn simultaneously into the intimate and the abstract: “All these holes and orifices breathing out, breathing in, just recycling these exhalations” (105).

My friend coined the term “purge and plunge” to describe this ancient ritual. This leap from the claustrophobic steam room into the bay. It's best for blood and body if it's done on a calm blue-sky-cold day. But today it's gusty and windy and sediment has found its joyride in the tumbling mass of covalent bonds that make up the water particles. It could look to passers by like a “pleasure suicide” of sorts (14). Running the distance of the manufactured sand from hot-box to shoreline. The cold wind blows peppermint fresh again my sweltering skin, deposits of sweat tremble with their resilient chemistry, nestled in the hollow of pores. As the bay waves break and ride over the sand, my feet find footing. Looking down though, the foundation itself seems to be both pulling back and surging forth. A vertigo of sorts destabilises me. Small but energetic waves; some crash others lap towards, against me. I wade out, the sea floor now barely visible through the murky green water decorated with swarming sediment. My ankles sting with the cold and I wonder, as I feel them brittle beneath me: what could feel better? I plunge: a generous dive into an oncoming wave. This is childhood. This is that Russian man's secret, make do banya. Stoic, poker faced a few meters to my right, rhapsodic giggling beneath his skin.

Campbell's challenging complexity is also a rare generosity—the alternate lenses from which to view characters and also the intertextual vibrancy. For example, Campbell's

writing-in and privileging of the beloved words of others through the hooded Jacquot. In a chance meeting, Jacquot declares to Piquet when explaining that he had failed an assignment because he used Artaud's words and not his own: *"His furious eyes, his rage. They were mine, those embers burning in his brain. I held my book to my chest as I lay awake at night"* (17). Jacquot, orphaned and lonely, found ardour in the words of Artaud and his and Monique's meeting on the bridge resonates when later, the reader is directed towards Bataille: *"I imagine that the world does not resemble any closed and separate being, but rather what passes from one to the other when we laugh, when we love each other"* (Bataille cit in Campbell 118).

Oh, the absolute ridiculousness of myself in the safe surge of this sheltered bay. My own "kohl-eyes" letting me down—steam and sea thinks nothing of making a mockery of eye (I) make-up. My eyes, a couple of smudged sockets in the distance, trying to press "little red riding dot" to a point.

Nestled between covers, Campbell suspends her novella in the parenthesis of a draft, out of reach of full-stop conclusion. Perhaps awaiting re-drafting, re-imagining, re-vision, re-reading. Campbell explains: *"the novella konkretion hangs, even in its willed finitude, as merely a draft, open at each end, and through which blow the draughts of the real, as it were"* (Campbell 2013b). I somehow find my way to Adrienne Rich's essay, *"When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision"*, where Rich states *"Re-vision — the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction"* and consider what erupts from the folds of text, that can only emerge in the time-space of the here-now (11). This, perhaps, is a point magnified in *konkretion* by both the reference to the work as suspended as a draft, but also the time-space junctions of memory, reminisces, history and location which map out Piquet's meandering through Paris. As a work of *"loiterature"*, for Campbell the geographical junctions within *konkretion* are *"space-time matrices of the threshold... productive in tripping things into elsewhere; these bring past time back into active space"* (2013b). Tying in with the multiplicity and layers of contemplations Campbell's work provokes, through both its form and subjects, is the final thought of the novella, given over to Gudrun's son, Felix Ensslin, this time via Beigesang, who said that *"the measure of your humanity is what you make of the stories you inherit"* (Ensslin, cit in Campbell 2013a, 141).

Returned to the hot-tub, skin mottled pink and the hot to cold to hot sensation prickling my skin all over before it retreats to a hum and then back to warmth. The connections we keep, that take it upon themselves to seize and question and to ride on through to the new. Without realising it, I am lost in a point in the distance. My stare is determined, probably also demented. My vision comes to and I am staring straight at the Russian, who might have a voice as ocker as any for all I know. He's finished his expressionless plunge and is, like me, just a head popping out of the

hot-tub bath. I smile and he smiles back as if to say: I'm tingling too. I can't help but think "Papa Lacan" (20). A gentle laugh breaks through my cracked smile and I begin to giggle. The steam room scowl bobs before a bubble jet next to him, her peasant-stock thighs exfoliated. I have trailed off my line of review. I am transfixed again, this time imagining all that was found, stumbled upon, when Piquet switched off the audio file to find "what remains" (88). In particular, the "wild young girls" perhaps saved from "skid row" while Beigesang defends her re-imagining of Meinhof and Ensslin by asking: "what is our role if we can't crack open the myths before they settle, harden, become mere currency for rad chick?" — after it's confirmed that Meinhof's brain has finally been returned to her body, "concreted two meters under" (5, 7, 131, 141). I get on my bike, headphone it home to Springsteen's "Lost in the Flood" — Campbell's reference to "Tracy Chapman's 'Fast Car'", only makes me more resolved to play it loud. "Oh yeah" (7).

Bibliography

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Biography

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