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Kevin Godbout

Western's 15th Annual Graduate Student Conference:

“Good laugh Bad Laugh Ugly Laugh My Laugh”

Department of Modern Languages and Literatures

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*History is a child building a sand-castle by the sea,
and that child is the whole majesty of man's power in the world.*

Heraclitus, Fragment 24

as translated by Guy Davenport

Infanticide and the Anxious Silence of “Language as Such”

I argue that the threat or representation of infanticide deployed in language can kick readers back to a state of silenced infancy, with a feeling of anxiety and fear as if one were abandoned to a violent and ancient postlapsarian, Hobbesian state of nature. My examples, in particular Blake and Benjamin, offer the aphorism as a possibility to engage the experience of infanticide, which is otherwise inexperiencible. The reader of the aphorism is usually the punchline of a joke; it is the aphorism which laughs at us, and not the reverse. That the aphorism can produce roaring laughter is certain enough, but that it can also *silence* laughter is perhaps its greatest power. It is in this silence, akin to the silence of infancy, that representations of infanticide hold their greatest power, beyond their appeal to melancholy and tragedy. I take the death of the infant as the symbolic birth of the “language of man,” which Benjamin distinguishes

from “language as such” in a 1916 essay. The infant, like all of “animate and inanimate nature” in Benjamin’s conception of language, possesses language as such. The latter is a bloody mark inherited from the Judeo-Christian myth the Fall, whereas the language of man is a rite of passage into the Babel of the world. The infection of divine language as a curse into nature and humanity, and nature’s melancholy sadness from having to pass this curse into its children, becomes the focal point of my reading of Blake, Benjamin and Baudelaire.

Witnesses to infanticide are compelled into silence. To take a recent pair of examples, Cormac McCarthy has famously depicted infanticide in two of his novels *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *The Road* (2006). His “Tree of Dead Babies” passage from *Blood Meridian*, where a band of riders wordlessly pass by an atrocious bush of slain infants, has left his readers utterly speechless:

[The riders] came to a bush that was hung with dead babies. They stopped side by side, reeling in the heat. These small victims, seven, eight of them, had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky. Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being. The castaways hobbled past, they looked back. Nothing moved. (60)

McCarthy returned to this tactic of infanticide shocking characters into absolute silence in his novel *The Road*, where an unnamed father and his young son attempt to survive in a post-apocalyptic America. While approaching a stranger’s campfire at night, the boy witnesses a horrifying scene where an infant is gutted and cooked on a spit:

[The father] was standing there checking the perimeter when the boy turned and buried his face against him. He looked quickly to see what had happened. What is

it? he said. What is it? The boy shook his head. Oh Papa, he said. He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. He bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close. I'm sorry, he whispered. I'm sorry. / He didn't know if he'd ever speak again. (167)

The boy, traumatized by the sight, refuses to speak for a period after this incident. McCarthy capitalizes on this fear. These passages from McCarthy's novels present infanticide as obscenities, with the intent to shock the reader.

Irish satirist Jonathan Swift presents an image of infanticide in his mock-essay "A Modest Proposal" that has a didactic and satirical purpose, set to the background of tragedy of his impoverished homeland. The essay, which adopts a persona the opposite of Swift's own political voice, satirically purports to save eighteenth-century Ireland from poverty by eating and selling its own young. Swift's persona and claims that his scheme to farm babies as agricultural products "will prevent those *voluntary Abortions*, and that horrid Practice of *Women murdering their Bastard Children*" (296) and that a "young healthy child, well nursed, is, at a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether *Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled*" (297). Swift also inserts a didactic purpose alongside his shocking language and exploitation of infanticide; furthermore, Swift as writer has his persona viciously attack and ridicule his own political discourse, wherein he had hoped to advocate *real solutions* for Ireland's problems. The babies in Swift are altogether *too* real, for indeed Swift's mockery of eating infants was inspired by the very real practices of infanticide in Ireland (and other countries) at the time. My point here is that Swift presents a representation of infanticide, albeit in a non-fiction essay, as meaning more than what it appears, as symbolic of another order of meaning and for a purpose indirectly

expressed. That indirection is undoubtedly ironic, but to echo Paul de Man famous essay on the subject, it is also dangerously close to allegory.

Dorothy Block argues suggestively in her book *“So the Witch Won’t Eat Me”* the fear of infanticide is a fundamental to children, it can dominate their thoughts and nightmares (1). But in order to speak or express anything to a therapist about this fear, the child must have already advanced past the stage of infancy into childhood. The birth of language as enunciation, communication or speech, I argue, requires the death of infancy. Infanticide, from a certain point of view, is a step in language acquisition. When children begin to babble, to laugh and utter vocalizations they have abandoned the silence of infancy: the infant has died and the child is born, has taken over. Bénédicte de Boysson-Bardies calls language a “complex gift” for infants, her presupposition, like most child development discourses, presupposes that because language is necessary to development it must be marked and received positively (2). Theories of child development, and their discourses do not present the stages of human development as a series of successive deaths, but from a symbolic standpoint, this is the thesis I have adopted. Furthermore, the development of language, and thus the opportunity for the child to enter into a social dialogue with his caretakers the world, has rarely been presented as a curse within linguistic discourses. Not so in Benjamin’s early essay “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” where he outlines a theological vision and conception of language. In the opening paragraph Benjamin writes that “all communication of the contents of the mind is language” and that the “existence of language...is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event of thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents” (1:62). Rodolphe Gasché insists that Benjamin’s conception of language, whereby

everything is communicated in language, is no trivial statement, it is the essence of his theory (12). In this sense, “language as such” forms the very basis of all nature and everything in it, whereas the “languages of man” are the result of the Tower of Babel. If Benjamin is to be believed, infants, like nature, possess language as such, even if they cannot communicate through speech. The following passage later in the essay serves as a ground to explore the relation of infants and nature as mute possessors of language, and of the violence the brand of language as such:

The life of man in the pure spirit of language was blissful. Nature, however, is mute. True, it can be clearly felt in the second chapter of Genesis how this muteness, named by man, itself became bliss, only of lower degree. [...] After the Fall, however, when God’s word curses the ground, the appearance of nature is deeply changed. Now it begins its other muteness, which is what we mean by the ‘deep sadness of nature.’ It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language [...]. It means, first, that she would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of *man* - not only, as is supposed, of the poet - are in nature). This proposition means, second, that she would lament. Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language. [...] Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute. In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate. That which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable. (1:72-73)

Fallen nature inherits a deep melancholia from the curse of God's words, nature mourns that it now carries language as such, but its mourning is completely silent. To adapt a comment from Giorgio Agamben on the Cartesian subject, the infant "is nothing more than the subject of the verb, a purely linguistic-functional entity," or in other words, an agent without praxis (22). The infant, born of parents cursed into fallen nature, carries this brand and its associated sadness and self-imposed muteness. The acquisition of one language of man amidst the multitude, I argue, forms the basis of a coping mechanism, or a defence mechanism (to borrow a psychoanalytic term), to repress the anxious silence through constant babbling and speaking. Speechlessness, when mourning a tragic event, recalls the muteness and sadness of nature. Though for Benjamin, the prelapsarian silence was once blissful, but has since become marked by mourning and the tragedy of humanity's fate after the Fall, the predestined path towards Heidegger's *Sein-zum-Tode* [being-toward-death]. The death of an infant, or worse the threat or witnessing of infanticide, a being endowed with language as such but now to never to communicate in a language of man, echoes the mythic tragedy of the loss of Eden, the loss of blissful silence.

Benjamin's work on the *Trauerspiel* genre of the baroque period complicates the relationship between melancholy, mourning and tragedy. Benjamin usurps a definition of tragedy from baroque poet Martin Opitz to open his exploration of *Trauerspiel*:

Tragedy is equal in majesty to heroic poetry, except that it seldom suffers from the introduction of characters of lowly estate and ignorable matters because it deals only with the commands of kings, killings, despair, infanticide and patricide, conflagrations, incest, war and commotion, lamentation, weeping, sighing, and suchlike. (cited in Benjamin 62)

I mention this to inflect my use of the word tragedy some of the epithets Benjamin attributes to *Trauerspiel*, without getting any further involved in Benjamin's thesis. I want to preserve and emphasize the melancholia of infanticide as a tragic image. As stated above, nature, in Benjamin account of Genesis, is endowed with language as such and as a result mourns silently. The infant, as he died into childhood, gains the language of man to repress this silence. But the trauma carried from nature into infancy looms like a shark beneath the waters of consciousness, waiting to smell blood in the waters. Trauma and melancholia may kick its victims back to a state of infancy, which is also a primeval state of nature. The road back to speech, the agon with this originary trauma, can prove a promethean task, to snatch a piece of creation back from an Eden beyond human access, to withstand the violence of language's fiery brand, to emerge from the bloody sacrifice of human history.

In the Gospel of Matthew a familiar passage marks the beginning of an important source text for the tradition of infanticide represented in literature and art. It is no surprise, at this juncture, that the "good book" remains a rich and detailed repository on every form of violence and murder which grounds the West. "The Massacre of the Innocents" passage (chapter 2, verses 16-17) should be familiar to those who have attended Catholic mass and has served as the subject of paintings by Guido Reni, Peter Paul Rubens and Pieter Bruegel and novels by Wyndham Lewis, Albert Camus and José Saramago. Baudelaire marks the connection between revolution and death in a short note where he writes: "*Toute révolution a pour corollaire le massacre des innocents*" [Any revolution has as a corollary the massacre of the innocents] (1: 714). The revolutionary sentiments of Blake and Benjamin, as I will discuss later on, carry this inherent melancholy - that any major social revolution dooms itself to a violent internal corruption and death. Like the committed revolutionary, the innate nature of a child's energies comes with potential and risk to trending towards life and also towards death, as emphasized in Benjamin, Freud and

Heidegger. Such a sentiment appears in Baudelaire through this passage from his *Journaux intimes*:

“Tout enfant, j’ai senti dans mon coeur deux sentiments contradictoires, l’horreur de la vie et l’extase de la vie” [All children, I have felt in my heart two contradictory sentiments, the horror of life and the ecstasy of life] (703). As Agamben writes: “In Baudelaire, a man expropriated from experience exposes himself to the force of shock. Poetry responds to the expropriation of experience by converting this expropriation into a reason for surviving and making the inexperiencible its normal condition” (41). In short, we cannot experience, and thus try understand, infanticide: literature thus functions as a means to suspend this experience through paradox.

Here is the passage from the New Testament:

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what has been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, / wailing and loud lamentation, / Rachel weeping for her children; / she refused to be consoled, because / they are no more.’ (1750)

Joseph, Mary and their infant child escaped Herod’s wrath thanks to the warning of an angel, which fulfills another prophecy, that Christ would emerge from Egypt. The life and parables of Christ, and his opportunity to escape infancy, to converse in the language of men, was confirmed by the blood and silencing of the massacred innocents. Death is a point of emergence, it is from the death of infancy that language can arise. The representation of the death of infants, writ large, can take on the symbolic potential for a rebirth. In the case of Christ, the death of many infants and an exile into Egypt, foretold in a prophecy written in God’s words and nature’s blood, was his required step to develop from infant to

speaking child, and served as a parable to echo his crucifixion and its trigger of the Christian revolution. The history of the aphorism in the West, to an certain extent, shoulders the tradition of the Christ's parables and Christic language. This type of language and the theological baggage it carries is crucial to both Blake and Benjamin.

While there are many wonderful aphorisms on infants, notably those collected in the "Ages of Man" chapter from W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger's collection published by Viking (esp. pages 383-387), I proposed at the outset to consider aphorisms on infanticide by Blake and Benjamin. I will consider the former first. As a lifetime Londoner who desired to awaken his contemporaries from their daily stupor of mediocrity and injustice by any means available, Blake was had a penchant and natural skill for writing aphorisms. Compare Heraclitus's Fragment 30 "Not enough or too much" (Davenport 161) to Blake's "Enough! or Too much" (38). The long sequence of aphorisms entitled the "Proverbs of Hell" in Blake's hybrid text *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* represent some of his best work. The notable line I would like to consider reads:

Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires (38, my emphasis).

This statement, with regards to the threat of murdering a baby, is exceptional and unique in Blake's entire corpus. For him, the word "infant" takes on strong Christian and mystic tones: infants stand in as both symbols of innocence and of Christ as infant. The echo to Matthew's "Massacre of the Innocents" appears at points in Blake as well, whereby he uses King Herod's name as a synonym of adjective for what he finds most detestable in society and culture (see "Annotations to Bacon" 629 and "Annotations to Thornton" 668). The expressions "infant joy" and "infant sorrow" are regular terms in Blake's mythic diction, and serves as titles to two of his poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (see pages 16 and 28). The figure of the infant, as a symbol of Christ, takes on a variety of referential meanings in

Blake's long poems and overtly prophetic writings. In short, infants in Blake's poetic world are idolized; the corruption of their innocence as lived experience, represented by his expression of "infant sorrow" is fundamentally tragic and mourned throughout his texts and engravings. To murder an infant is a serious statement for Blake, but the word "sooner" implies this action can be forestalled. What it ultimately means to enact desire in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is not terribly difficult to discern: the free expression and creation of art, free from classical fetters, religious censorship and hypocritical bigotry. The entirety of *The Marriage* is a triumphant manifesto of ideological reversal and revolutionary sentiment.

However, in the later long poems, also called prophecies, Blake's this enthusiasm for revolution is tainted, rendered ambivalent at best. In a passage from the *Book of Urizen*, the figure named Orc, the arch-revolutionary of Blake's mythical cosmology, provides a connection of Benjamin's conception of a primeval nature in mourning. Los, one of Blake's creator figures (a blacksmith) "siez'd the infant [Orc] / He bathed him in springs of sorrow" before watching the infant grow into a violent man eternally engaged in violence and war, fated to be crucified on the mountains of Albion (80). This allusion to postlapsarian nature, and the ambivalence with regards to sustained social revolution, takes a tone eerily similar to Benjamin's description of nature imbued with sadness.

Robert Essick writes that in the poem "Infant Joy" Blake has imitated the prelapsarian speech of mankind; furthermore, this infant speaks like Herder's famous sheep bleats (109-110). In other words, the speaker of "Infant Joy" does not actually speak at all, from a conventional, common-sense point of view. In Benjamin's terms, Blake's infant communicates through language as such. I would like to invite comparison between Blake and Benjamin via "The Critic's Technique in Thirteen Theses" from *One-Way Street*. While Blake has many famous statements on his artistic and critical ideals, Blake's

annotations are one source, but many of his letters contain strong statements of his literary critical views, including the well known: “Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding, is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry” (730). Though they share an affinity to Benjamin’s literary critical ideals, none of his expressed views are quite as stark as these aphorisms:

IX. Polemics mean to destroy a book using a few of its sentences. The less it has been studied, the better. Only he who can destroy can criticize.

X. Genuine polemics approach a book as lovingly as a cannibal spices a baby.

(1:460, my emphasis)

Thesis X is not *only* a ringing endorsement of infanticide *but also* of cannibalism. Via the logic of Thesis IX, even dead babies could be made fashionable, perverted into the capitalist and consumerist spheres of meaningless shock violence, losing any genuine subversive power or energy. Bogue polemics regard or disregard books based on their tag lines, key terms and political correctness. Benjamin essentially says that’s bullshit. The statement on the “critic’s technique” from Thesis X encourages a total reversal of common, post-Kantian judgments on art and books. *Genuine polemics* take the time to relish in the anticipation of the final judgment, the final meal. The book under scrutiny is slow roasted, spiced to perfection, left to simmer, plated with precision and care, and eaten slowly, with relish and dignity, muffling the enthusiasm and gluttony of the critic’s voracious appetite. The experience of the critic savouring the book, suspended just before the act of consumption, redeems the experience of literature, which Benjamin felt to be entirely devalued (see *The Storyteller*). In other words, the great critic doesn’t attempt to speak over the book under critique, the critic allows the literature to attempt to express the silence of Eden, the critic listens attentively and responds in turn, as one does during a family dinner.

Aphorisms, by their parsimonious and striking diction, through either absurdity or satire, can provoke fits of laughter. Blake's "Sooner murder an infant" and Benjamin's "as a cannibal spices a baby" are not easy statements to understand, interpret or comment upon. Yet, they demand a response, praxis, actualisation, awkward laughter. They each demand a reaction from the reader, they imply an imperative. Blake and Benjamin recognize that infanticide symbolises both tragedy and melancholy, but they perceive something also fundamentally redemptive in the death of infancy, something crucial to the violence of history. They use the threat of infanticide to offer alternative agency in a world which is all too happy to take meaningful praxis away; they offer the pursuit of desire as a legitimated enterprise, as a voyage into the abyss of history, to the abysses of language as such, no matter how unfathomable or deep. The journey carries the risk of violence, suppression, death and annihilation, but it also offers the potential for rebirth, not in a fictitious afterlife, but within the pages of history, written or unwritten, buried deep in the archive.

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