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On the Guillotine as Bachelor Machine

When in 1954 Michel Carrouges, with wonderful impropriety, drew a meticulous list of the "*machines célibataires*," he missed one: the guillotine. Not only does the guillotine have the manifest right to enter such a list, but it also makes a very strong appearance. Rather than merely being just another specimen, it presents itself as the archetype, as the first and unsurpassed masterpiece. After provoking turmoil and clarification within the list, however, the guillotine will probably exit, because, as a model, it greatly exceeds the examples collected by Carrouges.

Its mechanical structure, clearly divisible in two parts—upper and lower—perfectly imitates, at least morphologically, the scheme of the *machines célibataires* devised by Carrouges. Whereas the blade hangs high, a man lies horizontally in the bottom portion of it, on the "*bascule*," facing the ground with his neck stuck in between two iron blocks. We ought to think of the *bascule* as a very uncomfortable, capsizable bed on which a man, regardless of his guilt or innocence, is forced under justice's sharp axe.

Furthermore, the guillotine's upper portion acts upon the lower, as prescribed by the orthodoxy of the "bachelor machine." In this case, its eighty-eight pounds descend on the bare neck of a man, whose hair has been trimmed for the occasion, causing the sudden separation of the head from the trunk.

*

[These pages—which represent my necessary contribution to the commemoration of that glorious 1789—are dedicated to the memory of Maximilien François-Isidore de Robespierre, and the speech he delivered to the National Assembly in Paris on May 30, 1791, in which he championed the abolition of the death penalty throughout the Kingdom of France.]

Because of its poetics and efficiency, the "*machine à décoller*" is a perverse "aesthetic machine." Further evidence is provided by a series of empirical, albeit seemingly gratuitous, circumstances. Its poetics are enshrined in Saint-Just's words to the National Assembly, when he described the guillotine as a machine dear "*aux âmes sensibles*." Its spectacular attraction is testified by the black wavering of crowds which, in the better days of its glory, would never tire to gather around it. Thus, the guillotine's stand becomes a stage for both the victim and the spectators.

Finally, we have the secretly essential and fatal circumstances. If it is true that it has been devised and developed through state-of-the-art surgery in the person of the famous doctor Joseph-Ignace Guillotin and the unjustly forgotten doctor Antoine Louis, it is no less true that its builder belonged to the musical craft. I allude to the ancillary figure of a harpsichord maker, the all-too-greedy Tobias Schmidt, who arranged the construction of the first specimen for the sum of 960 gold francs.

*

Preoccupied with maneuvering the lever, dodging the blood spurts and kicking away the starving dogs lured by the mirage of a meal, the "*bourreau*" Charles-Henri Sanson will not be able to play the duchampesque role of "*oculist witness*": the task is handled by the "*tricoteuses*." *Voyeuses*, these women knit, watch and in ecstasy swoon and drop.

*

If we are to discover the guillotine's ultimate meaning, it is advisable to proceed cautiously. We must discard all the names given to it by ideology, patriotism and even popular hatred. Astounding though they may be, such nicknames as "National Razor," "People's Avenger," "Patriotic Scorcher" and even "Saint Guillotine," must be left behind: the only lexical contribution worth considering is that of a uniquely interested social category: the French underworld. Among its invaluable contributions, next to "*Abbaye de Mont-à-Regret*," the epithet "*Widow*" shines like a black fulguration.

As the man gets killed, the male consort is decapitated and she, the murderous female, is left triumphantly alone, in iron weeds, standing erect on the scaffold. A widow surrounded by blood, the guillotine thus proves that, in addition to the mechanical structure, it also has the functional mark Carrouges demands from his

machines. For he writes: "a bachelor machine changes love into a mechanics of death."

*

At the origin of the *machines célibataires*, however, lies a "female bachelor machine."

Genealogy as proof. One of the guillotine's ancestresses, which had an extraordinarily similar look, was named the "Maiden," the "Spinster," and was used in Scotland at least since the mid-sixteenth century. (A specimen is still available to the public gaze in Edinburgh's National Museum of Antiquities.)

*

Additional proof lies in its deployment. The first one who ever tried the guillotine and evaluated the benefits of its instantaneous dynamism and humanitarian softness, was neither a crowned head nor an aristocrat, nor a girondist and not even a jacobin. Rather, it was a "*vrai professionnel*," the parisian Nicolas-Jacques Pelletier, an habitual armed robber. The "première" took place on April 25, 1792, at half past three o'clock in the afternoon, in the spacious Place de Grève.

Although it met with the favor of the doctors who designed it and of the judiciary authorities, this experiment was totally disliked by the large public; and rightly so. The rapidity with which the new spectacle unfolded itself could not suit the "solo" performances of anonymous figures. Only the quantity and the variety of the representations soon to come could do well.

*

Because there is no life left which is not low life.

*

An energy circulates inside the guillotine's sober gears which is similarly restrained, in spite of the final crash. Thanatos takes advantage of this circulation and consummates its embrace with Eros by means of the frigid, frustrating and curdled eroticism typical of "spinsters," or of "widows" suddenly retrieving the mantis' compulsive religious gesture. The validity of Roger Callois' essay on this insect, which devours the male in the very moment of copulat-

ing, extends beyond the boundaries of both entomology and strictly speaking anthropomorphic, mythology: indeed, it sanctions the machine's meaning and functioning. It is only by swallowing the world of the machine as well, that the voracious eroticism of the "religious mantis" shows itself to be fully universal.

*

From the imminent marriage between the guillotine and the "bachelor machines" the following emerges: Guillotin, Louis and Schmidt are respectively the inspirer, the designer and the material builder of the never forgotten prototype; Duchamp invented its first name (*machine célibataire*); Carrouges was its first systematic mythographer; whereas the French "*pègre*" devised the prototype's esoteric meaning, in a memorable and anonymous performance.

*

The beheading machine makes its debut with a robber unanimously condemned. It moves then to the king, to the resisting aristocracy and clergy, sentenced to death by Jacobins and by reluctant Girondists. It continues with the Girondists condemned by the Jacobins, until it is the Jacobins' turn.

It is not, however, just a ravenous and devastating machine. There is something more: it is a nihilist machine. The contemporary prints had already understood this when, during the Thermidore period, it came out with such a title: "After sending all the French to the guillotine, Robespierre guillotines the headsman." We perceive the only human presence in the middle of a forest of guillotines, Robespierre, incorruptible as death itself, headsman of the very headsman. Having eliminated all his compatriots (all the men), he now sets out to accomplish the annihilating campaign, the grief, the scorched land, the scattering of salt and ashes.

*

We must feel no restraint and dissect the "*machine à décoller*," plunging our scalpel all the way into its dark heart, there where the symbol betrays its hidden meaning. We will find ourselves facing four imposing mechanisms: an instrument of the law (and, therefore, of sense), a quick executor of death sentences, an erotic trap and, finally, a timepiece.

The scales of justice, the automatic scythe, the perversion of love and the hand of the clock, by fitting one into the other, offer themselves in the guillotine as free spectacle.

*

The notion that the guillotine is the founder of the “artistic machines” is not only fair but also useful, for it allows us to raise a crucial issue otherwise ignored by all commentators. The issue of justice, hence the issue of sense, meeting its first great expression in the legal system. The blade’s descent between its two hinges imitates olympian Zeus’ head, the supreme legislator of the universe lowering his head in order to solemnly sanction a newly made decision.

The guillotine is a machine that produces sense, for no other reason than it produces justice.

*

Compared with the guillotine, the torturing machine in Kafka’s *The Penal Colony* has become explicit, didactic, almost loquacious, albeit in a ferocious way. Instead of the guillotine’s blade soberly embodying the law and silently executing the verdict, we have the mechanical Designer who illustrates the law by tattooing the sentence directly on the condemned man’s skin, causing his death. The iron bed on which the culprit lies seems a variation of the familiar *bascule*, the only difference being its continuous vibrations and oscillations.

Neither the eloquence of the law, nor the technical complexity of the apparatus, nor the combination of Designer, Bed and Harrow, mark the peak of a civil and technological development at all; rather, they announce its decay, its imminent putrefaction. In their syncretism, the imaginative asian cruelty and the european enlightenment got together to found the disaster.

The order that the machine is charged to personify reveals itself decayed in both spirit and matter. On the one hand, there is doubt, the loss of faith in the law. On the other, the mechanism is undermined by its very own antiquity, by its own excess of complication.

The ensuing crisis marks therefore the highest deviancy from the norm. No longer believing in his mission, the officer executioner takes the place of the last condemned man and commits suicide under the needles of the death machine. In the meantime,

the entire torturing machine explodes and literally goes to pieces.

*

In the words of the executioner, Kafka's machine promises ecstasy, the final transfiguration of the condemned, which is to say that, on the threshold of death, law and redemption, punishment and unexpected release coincide.

However, such coincidence belongs only to the past, if it ever did. In the present, it appears solely as promise and anticipation; better, it instances itself merely as discourse, as an overly detailed sermon by the old officer in which redundancy—against the choice of a possible conciseness—is not a symptom of conviction but of loss and disenchantment. He does not speak to persuade his interlocutor, an intruder who shows up in the bizarre attire of an explorer; he only speaks to convince himself (in vain).

What we see afterwards, what the only authorized witness, this voyeur explorer who is there by mistake, manages to see, is just the opaque face of the dying officer, moribund, a corpse. The interminable speech preceding the execution does not succeed in hiding the haunting deafness and indecency of the mortal remains. In its speechlessness, death does not utter a word. There is deprivation instead of plenitude, darkness instead of transparency, mutism instead of the epiphany of silence.

Perhaps, everything that happened has to do with eros; but only because, just as every plenitude, whatever its degree, partakes in eroticism, so an exorbitant degree of incompleteness is devoid of it. This is true even in the case of masochism, as Kafka's short story seems disturbingly to insinuate.

Surely, all this has to do with the presence of justice and sense, since they are responsible for the formation of laws and for the accomplishment of sentences. Joined together within a universal economy which demands bloodshed, justice and sense would end up assigning a place and a value to human sacrifice.

But, in *The Penal Colony*, the law (sense) no longer exists; and for the first time in the world of the Prague writer, even his mechanisms crash, refusing to keep going on the distressing quadrant of the rictus and of the compulsion to repeat. Just as the replacement of the officer with the condemned soldier does not summon the strength to restore justice and fill the void of sense, so the acquittal granted to the young convict amounts neither to a redemption nor to a liberation.

*

Blind to differences, the “artistic machines” can no longer distinguish between the judge and the accused, the torturer and the victim, the slaughtering priest and the woolly, bleating lamb, Abraham and Isaac, Agamemnon and Iphigenia, Charles-Henri Sanson and Louis XVI.

In this light, the highest crime against justice is perpetrated by Kafka himself: while his narrative machine is going at full speed, the torture machine slowly collapses and the motor of justice madly spins in reverse.

*

The eclipse of justice, entailing as it does the vertiginous fall of the senses, frees the absurd, releases the horror, displays the funereal and monstrous spectacle, gives free rein to the dark play of humor. And yet *humour noir* is in turn a polluted and corrective form of justice, always acting as a regulating force that is capable of introducing an acrobatic measure of balance in the midst of the wreckage. It will not be a horizontal equilibrium, as the balancing out of weights in the scales of justice. Through some kind of compensating forces, instead, it will be vertical. In the disaster, black humor acts like a latch setting in motion an interplay of forces and counterforces, of detractions and additions.

The presence of the elevator in the list of the humorous objects made out in his time by Aragon does not compensate for the absence of the latch, which is more eloquent and agile.

*

(The guillotine’s functioning too suggests a latch.)

*

Two illustrious execution techniques rule the two separate parts that make up the *Grand Verre*. While the world of the bride is still rooted in archaic customs, the world of the bachelor is aligned with modern times.

On top, in the “domain of the *Mariée*,” old-fashioned hanging rules: the female skeleton hangs in the transparency of the void. In the lower part, in the “bachelor apparatus”—which is, properly speaking, the only part of this work that Duchamp defined

"machine célibataire": definition that was to found the entire family—there is explicit recourse to the technique of mechanical beheading. The "nine malic moulds," this excentric group of virile mannequins, present themselves without heads. Theirs was a "mass-produced" guillotining. The place where they rest is aptly named "graveyard of uniforms and liveries."

*

Whereas Carrouges compares the slide of the *Grand Verre* with the little bed of *The Penal Colony*, endowed with a perpetually vibrating motion, we trace both of them back to the guillotine's *bascule*, to the ruinous mobility characterizing it. Moreover, according to the initial project, Duchamp's slide too ought have had a back-and-forth movement.

*

Darkness is all around, but high above the courtyard one can already see the lights of dawn. Mr. Executioner of the High Works of Justice pulls his pocket watch out and gravely exclaims: "It's time to go!" From this very moment, the ceremonial of the *"mise à mort"* will go on with the precision of a stopwatch, following rules in which every single detail is already spelled out.

"It's time." Since, after all, it is time that kills each and every time, capital punishment is like being ahead of time in an appointment with nature, something like rushing time toward a conclusion which cannot be avoided. Cloto cuts the thread. The old man with the scythe divides every mortal existence by two. Chronos devours his children and knocks men down.

"It's time!" But in this case, in the yard opening itself up to the day, death plays before time with the help of a rudimentary yet efficient machinery that is capable of "instantly splitting one's head in one single stroke" (as prescribed by the republican code). Execution represents a *"rendez vous"* one has arranged, not only with time, but also with that machine which produces death like any other product.

The clock dial and the legendary scythe come together and are perfected in the blade waiting at the top of the stage.

*

Yesterday, on the sundial of a villa in the *Ile de France*, I read the inscription: "*Una ex his ultima*" (One of these is the last hour). I waited for the sunset until the last sun of the day began shining on the windows of the beautiful facade.

*

The electrical clock of train stations has joined the project of the *Grand Verre*. In its most archaic section. The epileptic tremors shaking the "skeleton of the hanged female" imitate the sharp jerks which in train stations regulate departures and arrivals as well as the traveler's anxiety.

*

Tremendous persistence of symbols or their irresistible surfacing: against some scholar's opinion, the existence of guillotines with scythe-shaped blades has been historically ascertained. A good number of XIX-century prints prove it, together with a group of models on display at the Musée Carnavalet in Paris.

*

The writer bound to retrieve time's mythical scythe under the mass-produced axe of modern times is Edgar Allan Poe. The place for such a retrieval is the narrative space of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, where an impious death mechanism is set in motion. Moreover, he replaces the guillotine's rapidity with a very slow motion, a *pianissimo*, so that there may be again a revelation of the scandal and of the infamy of blood, which technical efficiency and reason's universality had tried to efface.

In the cell regulated by secret and complicated contrivances, the young man condemned by the monks of the Inquisition finds himself prisoner of a bloody machinery squeezing him from everywhere. On the sides, mobile walls keep closing in on him. Above, the combination of scythe and pendulum, which descends oscillating over his head, represents the real danger, time's veritable strong arm and, simultaneously, a symbol for it. We even catch a glimpse of an explicit representation of such symbol on one of the ceiling's panels, where the traditional image of the old, white-haired father Chronos appears. And, it is here, from his painted hands, from the realm of fiction, that the sharp and real death mechanism

comes out: the pendulum "such as we see on antique clocks," joined with the homicidal scythe.

At the bottom of the cell, the round pit is less a real threat than a chasm, a black abysm, a burial, where cut down men precipitate. Passive time, the gaping mouth, lies below active time, the reaper, the butcher, the ripper.

Placed under the aegis of the old god, the cell functions as a clock wound up to death. Chronos, the old king of time, is still the absolute tyrant of the new beheading machines, where the sharp hand and the automatic axe have incorporated the destroying scythe in their joints.

*

A mathematical writer, Poe has done his calculations well. In spite of the scenario's predictability, the Spanish Inquisition, with all its tunnels, dim lights and liturgies, had enough imaginary force to create a metaphysical backdrop for the hygienic and philanthropic horrors perpetrated in good conscience, in the name of virtue and ideology.

*

Voyeurs, knitters, "eye-doctor witnesses" ante Litteram, earthly incarnation of the bloody god. From secret slits in the ceiling the Inquisition fathers cast their glance downward toward the prisoner.

*

Just like Kafka's machine, the guillotine is raised against the father. With inflexible concreteness, the guillotine fixes goal and sense one more time in the trajectory that Louis Capet's obese head makes from the rest to the underlying basket, on a cold January morning. On the contrary, Poe inverts the direction, and the torment is mounted against the son, with the ingeniousness resulting from the old father's long expertise in evil.

*

It was inevitable that Charlie Chaplin (and not Charlot) ended his life on the scaffold. Obviously, it was an impeccable

double of his, with spats and bowler-hat, white carnation in the buttonhole and bamboo cane: I am referring to Monsieur Verdoux.

Charlot faces London bobbies and prison, where, by the way, he is very well off. Charlie Chaplin, alias Verdoux, faces the ladies' fearsome widowhood, the stoves' smoke, and the tribunal with its sentences without appeal.

Charlot must deal with the mechanical alarm clock which, after breaking, reveals the nothingness of linear time. Monsieur Verdoux, after refusing religious solace and accepting the comfort of a glass of rum, sets out to the appointment that the vengeful "*Veuve*" gave to him in the name of all of her sisters.

*

Open and unprejudiced, justice has immediately appropriated electrical energy to itself, in order to expedite the clearing of its files. Zeus' excessively old-fashioned lightning, which once struck and punished, is now the domain of engineers and electrical technicians, and comes in an updated version: the electric chair. Such an enlightened device could not but shine in the self-appointed Leader of civil and technological progress: The United States of America.

*

"New York State can be legitimately satisfied that death by hanging is about to be abolished in favor of another means of execution which is much more human and scientific. As of January 1, 1889, criminals will be executed by means of electrocution. Undoubtedly, in a civilized country intending to eliminate any barbarism, the electric chair represents the best method of inflicting capital punishment." ("*La chaise électrique*," Paris, 1890)

*

At the end of modernity, or when modernity comes to be recycled, Andy Warhol, a New York bachelor if ever there was one, conscientiously assessed "the american death" and felt he had to give a special treatment to the electric chair. He portrayed it alone or multiplied in couples, in triplets, in quartets, in crowded sequences; and he then brought it to further neutralization by means of the acid, cosmetic effect of pinks and purples, oranges and straw yellows.

With a sudden pull, the "bride" too enters the factory's stage on one afternoon: she fires a Browning against the bachelor who has become too famous, missing, however, the target. In this way, the bride's radical feminism misses the "widow's" strategic objective.

*

No less open and unprejudiced than New York state's justice, the bachelor machines keep themselves up-to-date too and follow the march of progress. At a certain moment of their evolution, electricity is wired to their mechanisms so we could witness an opposition between mechanical and electric energy, between the cutting, hard and noisy quality of the first and the soft and invisible one of the second. But electricity too is innerly divided by the duplicity of its effects: it consumes, burns and electrocutes; but it also reanimates and vivifies, generating beneficial and healthy currents.

*

Alfred Jarry is the first author who sets an imaginary creature against a likewise imaginary machine resembling an electric chair. Halfway between sports and eroticism, this encounter has also an ironically titanic connotation.

The "supermale" André Marcueil, a mockingly modern reincarnation of Heracles, mates with a love-inspiring, electromagnetic apparatus, built by the American engineer Arthur Gough.

During an unexpected incident, the "supermale" generates an electrical power superior to that of the magnet. The current reverses the flow and the apparatus falls in love with its adversary. Thus the machine-man has defeated once again the machine, but it's a high priced victory. In one and the same gesture, it provokes the destruction of the mechanical device and the end of André Marcueil who blows up, his remains smashed against the Art Nouveau gate of the beautiful park.

While the enamored and equally homicidal machine, by its very ruin, exceeds the autarchic condition of "widowhood": death rewards the winner.

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Raymond Roussel, who can boast the widest selection of "bachelor machines" displayed by modernity, introduces Galvani's and Volta's energy while preserving both its evil and benign aspect. In the "African Impressions," electricity, the natural electricity of storms and atmosphere, is used to incinerate the beautiful body of Djizmé, a fascinating black girl. (The presence of a woman as a condemned-to-death is to be considered an exceptional case, but only, of course, in literature.)

But it is in "Locus Solus" that Roussel prepares the biggest surprise: a modernly artificial electricity is employed to start an experiment of resurrection, of victory against death. By means of the connection of two diversely prodigious and somewhat magic energies, the "aqua-micans" (a liquid oxygenated to the maximum of its power) and electrical energy, Roussel, alias his fictional double, the scientist Martial Canterel, succeeds in reanimating a corpse, better, a residue of it, its facial mask, for a few moments. It is not, however, just any mask. It is Danton's, the great tribune who, on the last evening of his life, before going to the scaffolds dripping with the blood of those who preceded him, had shouted to the executioner: "Don't forget to show my head to the people: it's worth it!" And what does Roussel do if not expose Danton's head again?

The stroke of genius in "Locus Solus" consists precisely in this exhumation, with which Roussel closes the circle and welds the end to the beginning. The head produced by the guillotine's mechanical energy meets up with its ghastly, provisional and somewhat indecent resurrection in the electrical energy. Here is the passage at issue: "It seemed as though life once more inhabited this recently immobile remnant of facies. Certain muscles appeared to make the absent eyes turn in all directions, while others periodically went into action to raise, lower, screw up or relax the area of the eyebrows and forehead; but those of the lips in particular moved with wild agility, undoubtedly due to the amazing gift of oratory that Danton once possessed. . . . Earlier, in the course of similar experiments, Canterel had accustomed his eyes to interpret the movements of the buccal muscles, and now as the words appeared, passing over the remains of the orator's lips, he revealed them to us. They were disjointed fragments of speech, full of vibrant patriotism."

*

Carrouges, the authorized interpreter of the *machines célibataires*, unilaterally assigns this machine to death. Once we read it within the global perspective of the "bachelor machines," however, it appears as a counter-machine which attempts to oppose deadly inclinations and becomes a resurrecting device.

*

In its detailed meanders, Roussel's work catalogues many novelties. One regards an important change that took place in the power structure. The representatives of the Law, be they the Inquisition's fathers in Poe, the officer executioner in Kafka, or the very Committee of Public Safety which "invented" the guillotine, no longer rule over the machines, for their dominion is now in the hands of science.

Roussel's wise men, inventors, masters, holders of formulas and secrets, all have a bit of the magician, the conjurer and the medium in them. They all strive to reconcile technology with magic, artificial energies with cosmic forces, science's cold numbers with the calculations of a surreptitiously warmed up imagination. One of such wise men is Martial Canterel, who has dedicated his entire life to science and is now experimenting with resurrection techniques.

*

Neither readers glancing casually through a book nor the public attentively watching the state are enough for the *machines célibataires*, which in effect position spectators inside the work. I am referring to the three, four, or twelve "oculist witnesses" of Duchamp's *Grand Verre*; to Poe's ferocious monks who secretly spy on the young prisoner; to Kafka's lone spectator who gives the impression of being there by pure chance, like a man who has entered the wrong theatre through the wrong door (chance and error ensure here the humorous effect). Roussel is the only one who establishes a mundane dimension by introducing his chosen group of guests into the scene. The lighting, too intense, emphasizes men's tuxedos and ladies' low-necked dresses. Roussel's "celibate machines" seem to function solely during festivities, like XIX-century fairs' mechanical wonders. For its part, the beheading machine has the monopoly over crowds and throngs, the swarm, the enthusiasm,

the screams, the hats on top of the pikes, all the varying degrees of pathos.

Leaning on the zinc counter, I sip a beer in the café "Quatre Sergents de La Rochelle," behind the Bastille. So, this is the place where the parisian underworld had a Mass celebrated by a defrocked priest, in the white and ghoulish hour when the "Veuve" was consummating its fatal rite, in a nearby yard.

*

When writing these notes, I resisted the call of David's drawing of Louis XVI's execution and, last but not least, I defied the cold suggestiveness of its beauty.

This drawing accomplishes a translation, for it transforms the accident of death into a historical event, ennobled by the mediation of the classical world: the horses placed at the base of the scaffold resembling many ornamental sculptures; the *sansculottes* armed with ancient swords and bearing roman insignia; the austere robe of the old man in the foreground; and, particularly, the stoic and rhetorical severity of the attitudes in the spectators who consciously take part in the memorable event of which each of them highlights a distinct value.

Unfortunately, history's parade of meanings addresses the living, those who have time, all those participants returning home after watching the beheading. The rigorous sequence in the drawing attributed to David's circle addresses these people and no one else.

For those wishing to divide time, penetrate the moment and interrogate intimacy (the relationship among the condemned's neck, the iron of the rest and the blade edge), it is advisable to investigate the underworld's "*argot*." It is better to start with the armed robber Nicolas-Jacques Pelletier, who had the privilege of inaugurating the guillotine, than with Louis XVI; or to try and see how the shining blade takes Louis XVI back to Louis Capet, not a sovereign and not even a tyrant, but a man in his bodily nakedness.

Davidian eloquence, with all its neoclassicism and ideology, succeeds in transforming chronicle into history. Even the *pègre's* jargon contains a transforming power, but from chronicle towards metaphysics.

Epilogue in the way of feuilleton

Now that I must diligently draw my conclusions, I realize that the best solution for me is to sketch a *feuilleton* driven by lucidity, terror and a desire for liberation, mysterious like an automaton's contractions. Its sole protagonist shall be a virile head cut with surgical precision by a machine. Its vicissitudes will trace, against a dark backdrop, an eventful arc made of concealments, glowing incidents and transformations.

Fatally hit in the forehead by Kafka's torture machine and severed along the neck muscles by Poe's pendular scythe, this head encounters, towards the end of the story, Roussel's merciful, spectacular and scrupulous hands, which try everything possible: reversal of direction, the deviation from a destiny which remains attached to death, in spite of the conclusive experiment.

A central role in the *feuilleton* is played by a place, a hollow site, where the severed head ends up rolling each and every time. It is Kafka's ditch, Poe's fearful pit, because, if the narration imposes a happy ending with the rescuers' trumpets and the prisoner's liberation, the imaginary settles its accounts with a much more stringent logic and demands the beheading, the head falling into the void. And it is precisely from this void, deep as a tomb, hell or nothingness, that Roussel extracts the head and promotes an operation countering the previous one, representing an artificial resurrection effected within an underwater, experimental laboratory.

As prescribed by the inner codes of all *feuilletons*, the plot can be reconstructed only upon solving a mystery and achieving a recognition. The real center of the story lies elsewhere; the mainspring hides in the shadow, secluded from bright light.

My recognition [*agnizione*] has allowed me to see that the entire story, in which triumphant death meets an uncertain opposition in an uncertain epilogue, can be traced back to the guillotine. I mean that very arrogant and ferocious guillotine of Place de Grève, of Place du Carrousel, of the Barrière du Trône, of Place de la Révolution, of Place de la Liberté; that very guillotine which was inevitably consecrated during the feast of the Supreme Being celebrated by Robespierre on *Pratile* 20th of the second year of the Republic; and not the self-doubting guillotine which today is not only full of shame and remorse but also suppressed and hides in a dark basement of the *Santé* in Paris.

At the beginning, the virile head of our story is cut by the guillotine's blade and lies in the wicker basket, right in front of

the executed man's neck. Here, it finds itself in the same void as the one in which Poe first and Kafka later make it fall, in a double repetition that, slowing down the speed of the fall, highlights each time a different aspect, whether metaphysical or psychological, but, above all, horror and senselessness.

Arriving last, the dismayed, grave and experimental Roussel digs his head from that void. In Roussel's "solitary place" one finds a return to the origin, an abolition of any misunderstanding and disguise, a continuity between the present of the narration and a crucial episode of the French revolution. The severed head represents an inheritance, not only for Canterel's family that has jealously preserved it, but for the whole, large European family, the fetish, the totemic legacy which modernity has handed down for five generations. The Phrygians, with the embalmed heads of their ancestors, reside in the heart of the "*douce France*." It is of course Danton's unique and incomparable head, and the hollow place from which it has been retrieved to be preserved with such great love, is nothing but, Roussel makes it clear, the guillotine's basket, otherwise known as the "family picnic basket."

In its oscillating trajectory, the feuilleton displays its own exemplarity. Whereas the guillotine, working exclusively for death and producing only corpses, is modernity's "aesthetic machine" *par excellence*, the "artistic machines" descending from it essay to mark a difference [*scarto*] from the philanthropic death produced by the *machine à décoller*.

All together, and not without some dispersion, they inaugurate a countermovement, they prepare a counterspectacle, they put up a counterexhibition. All this will culminate in Roussel, where the "artistic machine" intends to start the great countermovement of resurrection.

In mythology, miraculous herbs—almost all renascent gods are vegetation divinities—cauterized the blood and instantaneously reunited the severed head with the trunk. In the twilight of modernity, even an unsatisfactory resurrection is machine-made because, since the origin of modernity, death has been programmed and systematically executed by means of a machine.

"Callimachus, my friend, I advise you not to give your daughter to a machine builder."—Plato

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