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Poetic Experimentation of Arthur
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In their introduction, Eugene Brennan and Russell Williams write that the Dionysian ideal of 'oneness' sought through intoxicants is traditionally defined by 'either obliterating self-loss or unequivocal affirmation of life'.¹ Alessandro Cabiati, in his chapter on the relationship of Arthur Rimbaud and Jim Morrison to intoxication, explores more specific aspects of these effects: compression and synthesis. He argues that for these two artists, intoxicants were a way 'to unify the enjoyment of ecstatic practice and its aesthetic reproduction by introducing into poetry techniques drawn from the performing arts'.² Poetry, music, and visual performance were drawn into the same sphere by the radical, strangely rigorous, and collocating power of alcohol and narcotics. From another angle, argues Cabiati, self-loss and unequivocal affirmation look like acts of creative multiplicity.

¹ Eugene Brennan and Russell Williams, 'Introduction: Writing, Politics and the Experience of Excess' in *Literature and Intoxication: Writing, Politics and the Experience of Excess*, ed. by Eugene Brennan and Russell Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2; Brennan, p. 3.

² Alessandro 'Fabulous Operas, Rock 'n' Roll Shows: The Intoxication and Poetic Experimentation of Arthur Rimbaud and Jim Morrison', in *Literature and Intoxication: Writing, Politics and the Experience of Excess*, ed. by Eugene Brennan and Russel Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 98.

Early in the chapter, Cabiati cites a letter to Paul Demeny in which Rimbaud refers to alcohol as ‘poison’.³ From this already-established idea of ‘an artificial modification of sensory perception’, Rimbaud produces a structured methodology of derangement that would be exercised as the path to a new kind of poetry.⁴ This new art would form ‘the basis of a reformation of language and consequently the very nature of human existence’.⁵ As an example, Cabiati mentions instances in Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* when operative moments of the text are combined with accurate descriptions of reality. This technique was intended to close the gap between art and life. In short, booze was a passage to a new world in which senses were no longer divided but unified and reformed. Cabiati maps this course onto Morrison in his outline of the two creative figures, who want nothing less than a regenerated world vision through the practice and collaborative synthesis of different creative practices. That the shape, feel, and senses of this new world were as yet unknown only added to the artificial intoxication and artistic drive that possessed both men.

Rimbaud as seer and Morrison as shaman wanted the same kind of totalising experience through art. However, whilst Rimbaud was driven by his individual desire for experimentation and theory, Cabiati offers a different impetus for Morrison: ‘According to Morrison, the contemporary human being was a slave to ordinary perceptions, hence not enjoying life but preferring to watch other people – the actors – living for him or her’.⁶ The deep impression of images and media, unavailable to Rimbaud, shaped Morrison’s interest in society and its relationship to the creative arts. Spectatorship was overriding the currency of individual experiences, something he believed a total art, born out of Rimbaud’s poetry, could correct. Exiting from the spectatorship in reality that Morrison chased involved the kind of immersion offered by cinema. The camera, Morrison said, came closest to catching the ‘inter- and intra- sensory correlation between...sounds, colours, and oculars’.⁷ The kind of cinema Morrison was interested in, one not of narrative but of images and unintelligible sounds, brushed ‘the chain of being’, revelling in its mysterious and incomprehensible nature.⁸ This is not unlike hallucinatory scenes Rimbaud’s poetry which aims to ‘dissolve...personality’ but are inherently

³ Cabiata, p. 98.

⁴ Cabiata, p. 99.

⁵ Cabiata, p. 99.

⁶ Cabiata, p. 107.

⁷ Cabiata, p. 99.

⁸ Cabiata, p. 109.

‘deceptive and false’.⁹ In the same way, Morrison’s cinema evolves from the recognition of superficiality in society, using the nature of artificial images to produce something authentic. During live shows with The Doors, Morrison tried to create this proto-cinematic insight into existence by using psychotropic drugs, mostly LSD, to attain a performative embodiment of Rimbaud’s ‘dérèglement de tous les sens’.

Total sensory disturbance first took place in Morrison’s mind as his idea of a ‘happening’. At this event, chemicals would be filtered into a room of people through the air vents. These chemicals would then turn the ‘agent’ into an ‘artist show-man’ who creates a performance to ‘witness himself’.¹⁰ In moments like these, the entanglement of reality and art is difficult to discern. Call it religious, call it spiritual, call it ecstatic, poetry itself has always been imagined as a space apart in which reverie is possible. In his book *Why Poetry*, Matthew Zapruder describes the state of reverie as ‘just beneath the surface of our moment-to-moment existence. It’s our brain’s way of processing experience before it moves to a place of availability’.¹¹ That a state of potential is always bubbling beneath our waking experience, has long been understood as the presence of the unconscious. Morrison claimed this was filled with ‘dreams of freedom’, accessible to anyone who was willing to give themselves up to literal and spiritual intoxication. His poetry stabilises the act of composition itself through unexpected and transformative connections; as he writes ‘The politics of ecstasy are real.../Turning night into day’.¹² He replaces the lyrical self with snippets from elsewhere, as in the following passage Cabiati cites:

The walls are garish red
 The stairs
 High discordant screaming
 She has the tokens.
 ‘You too’
 ‘Don’t go’
 He flees.

Music renews.
 The Mating-pit.
 ‘Salvation’
 Tempted leap in circle.¹³

⁹ Cabiata, p. 102.

¹⁰ Jim Morrison in Cabiata, p. 108.

¹¹ Matt Zapruder, *Why Poetry* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2017), p. 110.

¹² Cabiata, p. 112.

¹³ Jim Morrison in Cabiata, p. 110.

There is something Beckettian about Morrison's brevity and theatre in this passage. The scene and voices appear stranded, despite hints towards escape, as the music renews. It is unclear whether the nameless duo's waiting in a cycle of repetition will ever reach the change or revelation vested in the jolting incongruity of 'discordant screams'. Such a shift might bring the scene closer to the comprehension promised by Morrison's idea of poetic immersion. Below the surface is 'The Mating-pit', posited structurally beneath through a drop from one stanza to the next. New life is possible, but the image of a 'pit' is also readily associated with a grave. Salvation is the meeting of life and death but reaching this remains only in the realm of temptation.

Cabiati suggests this passage was Morrison's attempt to reach a state of cinematic depersonalisation through poetry. This resists the reading I have given above, as it resists any reading at all. It is precisely this interpreted and clarified world that Morrison wanted to leave. Whether he ever reached the state of his 'happening' remains unclear. A more cynical description of Morrison is that he led a hedonistic life. Hannah Arendt defines hedonism as 'the doctrine that only bodily senses are real'.¹⁴ This contradicts Morrison's claim that universal freedom from a bodily state could be achieved; release from its burden, its weightings and leanings: its prison. It was only through this body as it absorbed and reacted to intoxicating stimulants, that Morrison's transformation could take place. Arendt claims that hedonism, invested entirely in bodily sensations, is 'a totally private way of life'.¹⁵ This privacy is apparent in other passages of Morrison's poetry which Cabiati notes are 'characterised by a portrayal that teeters on the edge of nonsense, given that there is almost no connection between its various elements'.¹⁶ Morrison's use of free association and automatic writing adopted from Rimbaud sought access to a depersonalised, universal unconscious. But much of it resulted in the poetry of mental hedonism, in which meaning appears cryptically intimate.

One point omitted from Cabiati's chapter is the close relationship between intoxication, writing, and madness. Familiar terms describing intoxicating highs, 'losing your mind' or 'out of your mind', also apply to psychotic states. Morrison may not have experienced this, but the proximity intoxication shares with mania is relevant. The effect of drugs often distils the senses, allowing the user to focus on a particular sound or image. Sylvia Plath depicts this sharply in her novel *The Bell Jar*. During the build-up to Ester Greenwood's break down, Ester carries a suitcase full of avocado pears which

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 225.

¹⁵ Arendt, p. 225.

¹⁶ Cabiata, p. 111.

‘cannoned from one end to the other with a special little thunder of their own’.¹⁷ Later, as she overdoses, Esther sees silence moving; ‘at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep’.¹⁸ Elements and senses interchange, and scale is distorted. These are the sort of transformations Morrison sought through his intoxicated processes; attributes shift in the untitled lines ‘[s]hrill demented sparrows bark/ The sun into being’,¹⁹ and in ‘Power’ the false explosion of ego and time culminates in the lines, ‘I can make the earth stop in/its tracks. I made the/blue cars go away’.²⁰ As the writing of both Morrison and Plath is scarred by their biography, it is worth reiterating that composing poetry and the act of reading it are themselves sufficiently intoxicating, without stimulants or mental lapses. Chemically intoxicating or mad states are perception-altering experiences. But this trip remains separate from the act of writing, providing material for exploration, rather than the product of an immediate artistic creation.

Cabiati stresses the real belief both Rimbaud and Morrison had in their search for a new way of being. What none of these writers can answer however, is the ultimate mystery of what happens when a person reaches a state of purity and cohesion. The danger is that the other side will be no more real or desirable than where we are now. Like LSD, alcohol, or depression, the abyss could be an epiphany, or it could be an empty, unfillable space of nothingness.

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¹⁷ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 270.

¹⁸ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 396.

¹⁹ Jim Morrison, *Wilderness, The Lost Writings of Jim Morrison, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 35.

²⁰ Morrison, p. 25.

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