

BOOK REVIEWS

THE ADVENTURES OF THE MAN IN GOLD: PATHS BETWEEN ART AND LIFE. By Richard Shusterman (With Yann Toma). Paris: Hermann, 2016. 127 p.

Philosophy and fiction have long been considered polar opposites. The former moves in the sphere of abstract intellect. The latter draws its being from the world of sensory experience. In a word, philosophy is mind, while fiction is body. This is evident in the way the familiar examination question is posed for the students of English literature: 'The philosopher laments that the soul is trapped in the body. The novelist makes the body the very condition of celebration.' It follows that if the conventional opposition between philosophy and fiction is to be overcome, then the novelist must learn how to think feelings. Conversely, however, the philosopher must learn how to feel thoughts. Samuel Beckett and Jean Paul Sartre come to mind as examples of novelists who have philosophised fiction.

Now until I came across Richard Shusterman's slim philosophical tale *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, presented in English and French both, very recently, I had no idea about the reverse case of a philosopher having attempted the embodiment of his abstract thinking in a form that is recognisably fictional. Of course, if anyone from the discipline of philosophy were to attempt such a crossing of generic borders, it is more than likely for that person to be Richard Shusterman, the world-renowned philosopher of 'somaesthetics' who has given a decisive bodily turn to aesthetics. This slim book is Shusterman's first experimentation with the writing of literary fiction which is a distillation of his body philosophy. I must make clear at this stage that it is my unenviable lot to try to decipher that philosophy from the reading of the tale rather than from his philosophical works to which I am a stranger. But Shusterman gives enough hints to a lay reader like me to do the deciphering.

In a sense, of course, it is easier for a philosopher of aesthetics to think through the body. For the body is ingrained in aesthetics. Poetry, as John Crowe Ransom would say, is the 'world's body.' Terry Eagleton reminds us in his book *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) that 'the aesthetic is born as a discourse of the body', in other words, as an oppositional discourse which tries to counter the Cartesian split between the mind and the body. The turn to the sensory and the sensual that comes with the inauguration of the aesthetic discourse in the nineteenth century by, among others, Edmund Husserl, is perceived as liberating, as it frees the body from the long-held tyranny of rationality.

Ironical as it may seem, it is in the rise of the burgher genre of the novel that the aesthetic finds its true home. We need only recall the genre's most revolutionary exponent Cervantes to understand how. Here is the intriguingly charming account in Milan Kundera's *The Curtain* (2006) of what Cervantes achieved for the novel: 'A magic curtain woven of myths and legends hung before the world. Cervantes sent a knight and tore through the curtain. The world shone in all the comic nakedness of its prose.' Kundera describes a process which is akin to the 'creative turning to the body' that Eagleton discerns in aesthetics. But Eagleton enters a caveat, namely that the aesthetic is also marked by the regressive

move to inscribe the same body with a subtly oppressive law, which thereby cancels its full creative flowering. I will recall this caveat at the end of my summing up of Shusterman's compelling tale of the adventures of the man in gold. It is a tale that resonates with a simple moral: the body is the medium of our joyful and generative union with nature and the world, and it awakes to full potential only in a synergistic and harmonious environment. But the tale in bold strokes first.

Shusterman's book tells in three symmetrical chapters the story of the short life of the man in gold from birth through vagrancy to the moment of consummation of his love before he ascends to heaven. He is born to full adulthood because, spurred by a mid-life crisis, the pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman decides to lend his own 'soma' for the golden man to emerge during a creative experiment performed on him by his Parisian friend and artist Yann Toma, using flux radiants. It is a process in which the camera shots of a stationary subject in a gold body suit taken during the night, but illumined by the evanescent light from the hand-held lamps of the shooter who swirls around the posing subject, brings out the 'auratic' energy of the person. It is like the birth of a purer body – Shusterman would prefer to call it body and not consciousness as it would be conventionally called – within the impure physical body.

The golden man, the book tells us and shows through the illustrations by Yann Toma that intersperse the printed text, came into emergence in the process of several 'somaflux' experiments performed between 2010 and 2014 in places ranging from Paris, Cartagena in Colombia and Aalborg in Denmark. The trigger for the philosopher to reach beyond the repressed external body was, as I said, the mid-life crisis, the so-called plateau phase, during which the philosopher was made acutely aware of the limitations of his rational self. In the cavorting and frolicking quicksilver form of the golden young-old man the philosopher discerned the side of him he had repressed, the side that yearns for beauty and love as they are epitomised in the 'dancing deity whose human manifestations sowed the seeds of his existence in the pragmatist philosopher who loved those mortal beauties but grimly sacrificed their love on the manly altar of a career in philosophy' (p. 58). Shusterman writes a sentence next that can be justifiably deemed the *raison d'être* of the man in gold as well as of the book itself: 'To remedy the ruinous damage that reasoned arguments and clever words inflict on love's nurturing power, the Man in Gold eschews discursive language, recognizing it as the glory of philosophy but also an imprisoning source of its oppressive folly – its one-sidedness, expressing himself in posture, gesture and acture' (p. 58).

So Shusterman must continue his 'somaflux' experiment until he achieves that total transformation of self through 'the powers of possession' (p. 8). Interestingly, this happens neither in Paris where the mysterious birth took place nor in Florida, the philosopher's workplace, nor in the tropical beaches of Cartagena but in a little nook, a secluded rustic farm house near Aalborg University in Denmark. This is the place that finally witnesses, as we are told and shown in chapter 3, the unfettered and uninhibited emergence of the man in gold and the consummation of his love for the sculpted figure of Wanmei, the archetypal feminine figure, through a blessed union of bodies. One can either see it as a mystical sexual alchemy, imagined in medieval Chinese erotics, or as the fulfilment of a repressed wish à la Freud depending upon which way one is bent.

Fiction may be make believe, but fiction can also be the place where, as Stephen Greenblatt says, 'the made up and the made real touch and meet.' My new historicist training inclines me to put greater trust in the latter proposition than in the former. So I

see Shusterman's first attempt at literary fiction as a move to realize the dream of an out-of-body state in which one can shed the inhibitions of one's repressed and compromised physical body and be reborn with 'improved somatic mastery' (p. 8) for the better appreciation of art and for experiencing the *joie de vivre* that arises out of the union of yin and yang. I have only one problem with it and here I return to the caveat from Eagleton I alluded to earlier in the review. I frame it as a question: how likely would a person from a background less privileged than that of Shusterman and from a location other than the developed First World be to experience the kind of bodily liberation that the book talks about? If the untrammelled conversation that the book celebrates is sustained by the aphrodisiac of freely flowing wine and a plentiful salmon dinner, how likely is that to happen over 'a dinner of herbs'?

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STANLEY CAVELL ON AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING. By Garry L. Hagberg (Ed.). Series: Philosophers in Depth. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 365 p.

Hagberg's edited volume traces the legacy of Stanley Cavell's philosophical understanding of the role of language and aesthetics in the shaping of individual identity and relationships. It emphasises the idea that knowledge of the other is not achieved through the discovery of their most intimate secrets; rather, Cavell's primary ethical principle in building meaningful relationships is based upon accepting the fact that human finitude is a condition that cannot be overcome. Cavell remarks that acknowledging the other without demanding knowledge is the only way to avoid frustration and to overcome unnecessary barriers between individuals. The present reviewer finds some similarities with John Keats's "negative capability," namely "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason," a quality that Keats, similarly to Cavell, thought "Shakespeare possessed so enormously" (see Keats's letter to his brothers George and Thomas, 22 December 1817). The essays of this volume show how Cavell's idea of acknowledgement, as opposed to knowledge, interacts with a few philosophical traditions from Austin to Wittgenstein. The volume explores various texts across literature, films, and music that mirror human finitude as a form of tragedy that can lead to the most extreme form of skepticism, namely solipsism, "where a person takes hermetic isolation from every other human mind" (xi).

Part I, "Understanding Persons Through Film," gathers three chapters: two of them explore Cavell's ethical concept of acknowledgement in films; while the third chapter discusses Cavell's philosophical production in parallel with his own memoir *Little Did I Know*. Francey Russell's "Understanding Persons Through Film" explores Cavell's ethical difference between knowledge and acknowledgement through a close analysis of Roman Polanski's movie *Chinatown* (1975). Russell maintains that the noir genre supports Cavell's need for acknowledgement "primarily through its failure" (5). Polanski's *Chinatown* shows an excessive desire of knowledge perversely "concerned with the desire to bring to light ... what ought to remain hidden" (8). The perverse secret is the incestuous abuse that the