

Oscar Guardiola-Rivera

**Future Imperfect
(An Anti-novel Manifesto)**

I

Who are these foreigners coming to our country?
They bring their words and games
to play over our heads,
they show no shame when the pictures they bring
with them make us tremble.
Didn't they see the news?
Didn't they die in the crossing?

Go tell them we, the lords of this land,
the Lords of Xibalbá,
call on them
to perform
according to our conventions
in the theatres of our laws.

In seven days
we shall send our
Home Office team
to play against the foreign twins
a game we call 'The Harrowing'.

It is a simple game,
a forensic game,
an interrogation game.
Its final aim:
acceptance of the outcome.

II

Seven days later,
the twins
Hu and Ix
came before the officers
in the Home Office's dark house.

Here is your sentence,
said the officers.

You can read it,
realise your lives are over
and succumb.
You can even thank your interrogator for
finally releasing you of your burden.¹

The rules of the game are quite simple,
said the officers to the twins Ix and Hu.
Do not speak in pictures,
tell us believable stories.

III

Tell stories? Sardonicly said a twin.
I would if I could
but no longer can.

People no longer dare crossing the threshold
to the underworld,
where stories hail from.

We have lost the elements of poetry and music,
no longer know how to deal with mythic
matter,
and only a handful of writerly poets,
in a handful of places,
in this disenchanted world of ours,
can summon enough plebeian courage
to bring about new visions,
experimental objects or essays.

¹ Dina Nayeri describes with these words a forensic procedure of interrogation used in asylum and criminal cases in the UK and the USA called the Reid Technique in *Who Gets Believed?* (Vintage, 2023)

We gave up on the inner life of the word,
gave up on the world of the Nohor,
relinquished our dream-books and word-cinemas.

Instead,
There are novels.
Perfectly crafted, best-selling novels,
written with a mastery no one denies.
But can their linear narrative,
on its own,
do justice
to our stopgap migrant condition?

Perhaps it can expose a truth
in the light of forensic judgment.
The light of today's industries
of performance.
But if exposure destroys its secret,
as shaman Don Miguel says
from ancient Amerindian wisdom,
then how to bring about a revelation
that does justice to it?

We say secret and we mean hidden truth,
and when you equate secret and truth like this
'it seems to me there's more than a hint
of mystery and fate working in cahoots.'
So says the shaman.²

Consider dialectics & dialogue,
first figured in the living language
of a poetry to be declared aloud,
the way one declares love,
dramatises an oath,
declares it broken,
the way young Achilles swore to protect dark-eyed Chalcas,
bearer of doom prophecy.

Dialogue was relocated –
from that theatre's stage
to the stage of the reader's mind.
Giving absolute reign to
the adult's imagination of
the child's imagination
which adjudged the latter

² Michael (Miguel) Taussig, 'The Adult's Imagination of the Child's Imagination.' *Aesthetic Subjects*, ed. by P.R. Matthews & D. McWhirter (University of Minnesota Press, 2003) p.449.

to be fantasy,
burying the asymmetry
of a different past.

We say:

let's bring *critique fantastique* back –
dream-books and word-cinemas,
which moderns declared relics of the past
and displaced onto
a
homogeneous
~~empty space~~,
archived in a final resting place,
to be protected from the perils of the present,
in fact,
burned or banned when daring to imagine futures otherwise.

Imagined an instance of misrule
by the adult's imagination of the child's imagination,
inquisitors and officers
commanding us
to
bow our heads to the west where the sun sets
and accept death triumphs
desire is betrayed
and dreams or utopias are mere counterfeit
currency.

In the new pact, the poetries of
critique
fantastique
& masque

were flattened
into plot,

subjectivity into identity
or character.

This new pact with symmetry (of plot)
collapsed all dimensions of literature
into those of inner space

& commerce.

IV

Tell stories? wondered the other twin.
I would if I could.
but we K/c/ant.

People no longer dare crossing the threshold
to the underworld,
where stories hail from.

We have lost the elements of poetry and music,
no longer know how to deal with mythic
matter,
and only a handful of writerly poets,
in a handful of places,
in this disenchanted world
can summon enough plebeian courage
to bring about new visions,
experimental objects or essays.

We gave up on the inner life of the word,
gave up on the world of the Nohor,
relinquished our dream-books and word-cinemas.

Instead,
we have novels
perfectly crafted novels
written with a mastery no one denies.
We have
televised news & melodramas.

But in these novels,
if a girl speaks to her dead sister
or a boy escapes into a ghost forest
after the Nazis set their house on fire,
if that boy or girl ran into
woods
or escaped by sea from dystopia
or fell through a hole underground
leaving their body behind
to be preserved at the bottom of the sea
or in those
woods,
for tomorrow's sake,
rather than wait for death
to take them today,

And in that instant

(how long is this instant?)

their sister's lifeless body seeps up to them
from beneath
and returns
to subtle matter

nuzzled in the crook of what once was
their father's or mother's arm
so that,
fist balled against
God
Earth
Sky High,
that boygirl weeps over bodies
in their House of Ice
his
her
mouth
agape behind a hurricane
unable to react
mute
not willing to compute
or relate the facts,
then that is judged not to be true
isn't realism
couldn't count as hi-fidelity literature
nor be registered
as what may be considered believable.

Because today's industry of performance
advises that the page or the camera be all-seeing.
The audience wants to see it all.
All that matters, all that,
especially mattering.

The panopticon of voyeurism.

To be realistic & believable,
today's industry of performance says,
set aside,
onto a backwards space & time,
the other things that might not pass
the test of the forensic eye
of a praetorian class
(a flick of the hand
a gesture of wonder or surprise
a fleeting glance at the lens,
and the take is rubbish).

V

Consider Charles Aubid,
Of the White Earth Reservation.

no one knows how many
many moons ago
on the same shores.

Charles Aubid said he was there
when Old John Squirrel met with the Federal agents
submitted to their harrowing interrogations
responded from memory to their claims for evidence
and he listened carefully when after
the inquisition officers told Old John Squirrel
that the White Earth Chippewa nation would always keep its rights
to harvest wild rice
on the shores of the Rice Lake Wildlife Refuge in Minnesota.

Charles Aubid told Judge Lord
that the Anishinaabe always invoked their rights
by stories.
He told Judge Lord
that Old John Squirrel was there
in those stories
and by those same stories he was made present that day in court.

John Squirrel is dead,
Judge Lord said,
looking down on the Anishinaabe wordsmith Charles Aubin from his judge's
chair,
and you cannot say what a dead man said.

The Lord of the Court
Judge Miles Lord
could have heard in Aubid's testimony
the visual trace
and memory
of that spoken agreement.
But what he heard that day in court was hearsay,
and therefore unbelievable.
Instead, Judge Lord
sided with the Federal Attorney
who had objected
that in accordance with the forensic precision
of inquisitorial procedure
only the law's theatre
of equal masks without presence
can be admitted
to be timeless and unchangeable.

There's no room in the burrow for poetry or stories.

VI

The Harrowing
interrogators
the
Inquisition
agents of the Home Office
US federal agents
Judge Lord
the Lords of Xibalbá
and the bird-demon Vucub
Caquix
are more than characters.

They embody the architecture, the framework, manners, theatre and creed
of a society
and show to us what happens
when that society descends
into a cult of architecture, manners, theatre and creed
in which no room is left for poetic memory and stories.

If a novel cannot show or relate to us
that other reality
if it cannot make room for the rhythm of poetic memory
the music of its landscape
if it sides instead with Judge Lord
deaf to the connection of the dead and the living
and builds only monuments on the page,
all the worse for the novel.

No matter how loudly the novel declares itself realist
addressing the gaze of a disembodied audience,
self-referencing and distant,
placards over its head,
at the very least the novel will have to be reinvented.

It would be best – best for literature and for society
if it stammers,
if the novel
fails
hesitates
giving us time,
time to think
which is memory & life
which is what the life of the word is.
Living memory not silent monuments.

Stammers are resonances

allowing for time's transit
carrying the long past on into a future otherwise than it was
transforming that resonance
to make us pause and hesitate

its reverb moving in a wave
to make something happen in us that can no longer wait.

They show us the way
to aesthetic ideas, principles or new beginnings
with the force to carry
into and create another future.

If they show the way to utopia,
that is not what utopia should look like.

Let understanding stop at what cannot be understood.

That would be a high achievement.

Oscar Guardiola-Rivera is a writerly poet and award-winning author who teaches philosophy & human rights in London. He is being educated by his kin – wordsmiths among the native peasant community of Las Pavas in northern Colombia, people whom he has accompanied for twenty years. His further visionary writing in *Night of the World. Book Two* is forthcoming in 2024 (the87press), as is his experimental essay *This Will Make You Makeful* (Rowman & Littlefield), and, in late 2023, a wide-ranging *Beyond Borders* podcast in conversation with Aminatta Forna and Mark Muller Stuart.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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