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The Fragile Shelter of the Declarative: on Edouard Levé

1. The left side of the face in the photograph— hence the right side in life, or what once was life, for its subject has committed suicide six years back—is ovular, with a swatch of stubble stretching into the shadow in the hollow where the sphenoid and temporal bones meet. The thinning hair is invisible against the black background, and the large lobe of the ear is disproportionate to its thin crest. The other side is gaunt. The mouth skews to one side, and one eye is slightly higher than its neighbor. Their stare is dignified and resourceless, and recalls those lines of Celan rebuking the lifting of stones and the exposure of those constrained to cower beneath them. The imperfection of the face is what renders it pathetic, in the strict rather than the derisory sense of the term, and calls up an idea I have never had the time to write about, that art is predicated on injustice, particularly in the conferral of dignity, and is a moral gesture directed toward the reapportionment of commemoration. The photograph, attributed to the portraitist Marthe Lemelle, is on the page of the Centre George Pompidou. When I begin to write, I am not aware that a similar image was split and its two halves duplicated to yield a pair of phantom twins, one chubby, one lean, in Edouard Levé's 1999 work *Auto-jumeaux*; nor do I recall that he had already remarked in *Autoportrait* on his own bilateral asymmetry. The vulnerability of Lemelle's image is purposely effaced in the distortion. Of his photographic work in general, Levé remarks: "There are no psychological relations between the characters . . . What I produce here, as in my other reconstitutions, is a referent without history."

2. In his essay on Edouard Levé, *L'esthétique du stereotype*, Nicolas Bouyssi, quoting Gilles Deleuze, observes: "The purely present object does not exist; everything present is ceaselessly enveloped in a 'fog of virtual images.'" The

purely present object I take to mean something like the above-mentioned referent without history, whereas virtual images would consist in the echoes of the past, the nagging doubt as to other presents, maybe more valid than one's own, and the propulsion, subordinate to but not in the least dependent upon the will, into futuration. The virtual—history on the one hand and telos on the other—lies at the basis of the distinction between subjects to which Levé's acts of leveling are openly hostile, as attested to in his photographic series *Homonymes* and *Amérique*, the one portraying common people who share the names of famous people, and the other unremarkable cities in America named after storied world capitals. Among the characteristics of "list-artists" like himself, Levé stresses the importance of "the refusal to establish hierarchies, to select, or even simply to choose."

This sort of programmatic esthetic statement tends to obscure under the cloak of aesthetic activism a sensibility that precedes and inspires it; in Levé's work this is the unbridgeable alienation from the sense of meaning in ordinary undertakings. The relationship of this affective state to Levé's documented depression and eventual suicide seems far from casual. Among the most marked aspects of his work is the removal of a necessary ingredient to a ritualized activity to accentuate the strangeness its ritualization conceals: in *Rugby*, for example, men are posed in postures of athletes at play, but expressionless, and without the ball; in *Pornographie*, fully clothed men and women are arranged in hardcore sexual positions. This is *ostrananie* not as an artistic gimmick or a mere mode of sharpening the spectator's perceptions, but as a reflection of lived experience.

"Putting two things together that are unrelated gives me an idea," Levé states in *Autportrait*, inviting comparisons to his Oulipo forebears and to Raymond Roussel, whom he admired deeply. Yet only a few pages before, he writes, "Virtuosity annoys me, it confuses art with prowess." And in general, there is a somber urgency in Levé's writing that is as far as possible in intent from the fluency and wit of Queneau's *Exercises in Style* or the mirth of Harry Mathews's *Singular Pleasures*. Levé has described his work as literary cubism, where the agglomeration of declaratives is analogous to the perspectival

planes; but whereas cubism remains an idealism, a method of approaching an object whose transcendent substantiality is never questioned, Levé's refusal to impose order on his sentences calls into question any possibility of a unifying principle. Instead, there is a visceral paralysis before the semantic systems by which sense is made of the world.

3. The cordoning off of artistic narratives from other forms of verbal production is probably a mistake, insofar as the marks of psychological disturbance evident in the latter are characteristic of the form of the subject's thinking and are bound necessarily to affect the former. This is particularly the case with postmodernist writers whose writing is only classified as fiction for lack of a better term. It appears obvious that assertions as to the autonomy of the work of art such as were characteristic of New Criticism—which in any case have always struck me as expressive rather of an aversion on the part of their advocates to the broadening of their reading beyond belles-lettres than any defensible theoretical program—is inadequate to the analysis of a book entitled *Suicide* that draws on the details of an actual suicide and the author of which committed suicide mere days after passing the manuscript to his publisher. The same cannot be said for the suicidologist Edwin Schneidman's idea of the postself, his studies of the banality of suicide notes, or the enormous corpus of studies affirming the fundamental role of autobiographical memory distortions in depression. Recollecting on the one hand that studies of word and image frequency in autobiographical writings as well as in response to projective tests have shown robustness as predictors of future suicide, and on the other, that Levé himself describes suicide as a meaning-generative act, a gesture conferring order on the "incoherent" acts of the living, it is fruitful to consider to what degree Levé's writings and photographs portray the descent into a situation of psychological frustration from which suicide appeared the only reasonable exit. The aim of doing so, it should go without saying, is to enrich critical appreciation of his work, not to stifle it by resort to by reductive platitudes or Lacanian mystifications.

4. The first traces of Levé's artistic pathology lie in the works for which he was primarily known in France in his lifetime, his photographs. In 2000 he exhibited a series called *Angoisse* (Anguish), taken during a short stay in a city of the same name. The photos document banal, depopulated surroundings: a dismal dance club, a closed church door, a frowzy dining room with plastic tablecloths and deer heads on the walls, each described simply in terms of its location: Entrance of Anguish, Anguish at Night, House of Anguish, and so on. In an interview, Levé remarks: "It is true that it is a somewhat surrealistic village, because if you just add its name to any word—'fence of anguish,' for example—it all becomes interesting." In addition to the additive technique seen here and in *Pornographie*, where the subjects' clothing works to restore a sense of bare corporeality normally swallowed in the erotic fervor the pornographic image provokes, Levé also employs the reversal seen in the series *Homonymes* and *Amérique* and the subtraction of essential elements characteristic not only of *Rugby* but also of his second prose work *Journal*.

The photographs present a number of themes that will predominate in the writings that follow them: a dispirited, almost humorless irony, the avoidance of temporal succession or spatial specificity, ambiguity about pertinence and belonging, the abstention from or derangement of proper names, and an impoverishment of affect, rendered jarringly apparent in what Nicolas Bouyssi calls the "asemantic" faces of Levé's subjects. This mania for reticence strikes me as the photographic equivalent of the primitive language games proposed in Wittgenstein's later writings: by suppression of the details in which inquisitiveness is normally bound up, mollified and lost, Levé pushes the viewer toward the question of essences: of the what persists in people and places whose claims to their titles have been annulled; of whether a face deprived of expression or a body arrayed to a purpose for which the catalyst has been removed continues to have any sense at all.

5. Laurence Brogniez and Charlyne Audin state, in reference to Levé, "Enumeration tends toward a form of exhaustion." This exhaustion, which

should be taken to mean both the expenditure of available possibilities and the physical and psychological feelings of weariness, is present in Levé's writings from the opening sentence of *Oeuvres*, his first book in prose: "A book describes works that the author has conceived but not brought into being." A list of 533 possible art works follows, ranging from facile to ingenious to absurd: a camera is dropped from a window, filming its own fall; a large chair is surrounded by several small tables; a group lobbies to have salaries paid to zoo animals. Levé's eventual realization of a small number of these projects only serves to emphasize the contrast between the fertility of his imagination and the relative atrophy of his resolve, and the sense that it is extraneous to carry out what has already been conceived, a condition that bears at least a family resemblance to despair: an emotion shared by the figures in his photographs, aimless and only casually aligned to some whisper of purpose, transgressing the very idea of embodied being, which Merleau-Ponty defines as an inclination-toward.

Levé's second book *Journal* returns to the subtractive technique featured in *Rugby*. It is divided into eight sections, including Society, Science and Technology, Classifieds, Culture, and Television. Each consists of news stories with the proper names excised, so that it is impossible to say where they took place, or when, or to whom:

A woman, a senator from a liberal opposition party, was killed while driving through the streets of the capital, a week before the congressional elections. The police have accused the revolutionary armed forces. Three other people were killed in the course of the attack.

In the course of this writing, for the sake of comparison, I have reread a number of passages from the book alongside articles from several days' newspapers. An example:

Lanza killed 20 first-graders and six educators with a semi-automatic rifle inside Sandy Hook Elementary School on Dec. 14. He also shot

his mother to death inside their home before driving to the school, and committed suicide with a handgun as police arrived.

Which of these two, I have asked myself, is truer? To pose this question is to inquire as to the purpose served by the proper name in discourse—the extent to which it discloses and the extent to which, under camouflage of disclosure, it is an instrument of suppression. The name of Adam Lanza in the second story serves as a provocation to the trotting out of commonplaces—be they sustainable or no—about the virtues and shortcomings of gun-control laws, the quality of mental health care in the United States, and so on, stock phrases pulled from the cultural ether that have the form, but not the inner texture, of discursive thought. In many ways, it can even be averred that so many news stories' highly morbid nature is related to the need for psychological immunization provoked by the “shock” of the modern age as described by Benjamin in his essay on Baudelaire, for a series of generally doubtful excuses why the disasters that surround us will nevertheless not close in. And perhaps in a larger sense, what is conveyed by news discourse is precisely a set of instructions for deferring the emptiness of the purposes embodied in the news-consumption experience.

Levé's “reconfiguration,” to use his term, extends into spheres beyond the lurid. The Economy section is particularly dispiriting:

An investment group has indicated that it will purchase the majority stake in one water firm for another water firm.

Though just short of 150 pages, the banality of such passages induces a chastening tedium. Thinking of the articles one reads every day that are formally indistinguishable, and differ only in being festooned with words like Yahoo, stem cell, the BRIC countries, and Kanye, one wonders: is it only in proper names that meaningfulness resides? And if Yahoo, stem cells, the BRIC countries and Kanye have no more lived poignancy for me than the absent referents that populate Levé's brief chronicles—if I have never been

to the BRIC countries, never met or even listened to Kanye, have the vaguest idea of the nature of stem cells and know nothing, really, about Yahoo, beyond its unsightly purple logo—do these words not stand in then for mere symbolic values the essential qualities of which I am unacquainted with?

It must have been clear to Levé how trite the preoccupations of newspaper readers appeared when clarified in this way. To that extent, I believe *Journal* can also be viewed as a gesture of scorn expressing deep social alienation, the pain of not caring what others care about, or of not even being able to care, that is fundamental in, among others, the Durkheimian model of suicide.

6. It was during a 2002 trip to the United States undertaken for the purpose of photographing the towns later featured in his monograph *Amérique* that Levé, deeply depressed and convinced that his death was looming, compiled the list of 1,500 declarative phrases later published as *Autoportrait*. Though nominally inspired by Joe Brainerd's *I Remember* and its French analogue, George Perec's *Je me souviens*, *Autoportrait* has none of the delicate wistfulness of its forebears, and presents a vision of the self as a bare cumulus of statements ranging from prosaic to heartbreaking. Arranged haphazardly, with Levé's customary refusal of privilege or hierarchy, their effect is anti-evocative or even evocative of absence in a way that recollects the case histories of patients subjected to electroconvulsive therapy, who have, in place of memories of large stretches of their lives, a rote aphoristic knowledge gleaned from the statements of family and acquaintances. From the first page, procedural self-definition seems to stand in for the absence of the robust—even if demonstrably false—autobiographical intuitions that ground the psyches of ordinary people. For example, Levé writes of a time when he wished to see whether or not he was homosexual, and attempted to masturbate while imagining making love to a man. Framed differently, this anecdote could be amusing, but in *Autoportrait* it reads as one more indication of the author's inadequacy for selfhood.

The English translator of *Autoportrait*, Lorin Stein, remarks in an interview on a certain kinship between Levé and Montaigne. *Autoportrait* is an essay in Montaigne's sense of a sally or attempt without a foregone conclusion. This is

of especial interest to the degree that the essay, with its generic indeterminacy, best records the imprint of the mind of its conceiver: a person's natural endowment of reticence, fluent wisdom, or boisterousness, unsuppressed by convention, show themselves in the essay in their wonted proportions. *Autoportrait* departs from a radical sense of unfamiliarity with the inner self and is characterized by a tendency toward the equation of intensive or ontic realities with their merely constative or numeric expression: in place of a textured discussion of the author's sexual life, there is a list of the places on a woman's body where he has come, the numbers of people he has slept with, the places he has made love. This clerical vacuity imposes onto the events of life the same feeling of extraneousness that inheres to artistic endeavor in *Oeuvres*: what is considered is not the momentary, irreducible surge of feeling, but the outer form and its logical propensity. A seemingly offhand comment about swingers' clubs is illustrative in this regard: "I appreciate swingers' clubs, which take the logic of the nightclub to its natural conclusion." Levé's perspective here takes the ritual of build-up, the *deceleration* before the completion of the sexual conquest, to be a superfluous distraction. The conclusions rendered up when the reasoning behind this statement are applied to life as a diversionary episode between birth and death are clear.

7. Recent research on depression and suicide has focused heavily on deformations of memory among the depressed. The cause-and-effect relations are far from clear, but it is established that the depressed encode memories differently from their non-depressed counterparts, often showing extreme deficits in event-specific knowledge with relation to happy moments in their lives and a tendency to the overgeneralization of happy recollections in relation to sad or distressing events, the episodic content of which is left intact. A group of researchers based in the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris have found there to be shortcomings in the auto-noetic consciousness of depressed patients, so that their memories of positive events tend to be dissociated from a sense of self and remembered as though from a spectator's perspective; further, in many cases, the depressed rehearse their negative memories, so that they

become clearer, more elaborate, and more oppressive over time. The effects of these distortions are recursive. An initial negative bias in memory encoding over time tends to eclipse the possibility of producing happy memories and the self-assurance that relies upon them for persistence. With time, these effects alter the ordinary functioning of the brain, leading to physiological changes due to which the resumption of a happy life becomes impossible.

The preceding paragraph, though a hasty and partial summary of current findings, should be juxtaposed with the following statements from *Autoportrait*: “I live with a feeling of permanent failure, although I don’t often fail at things I try to do”; “I have trouble remembering any truly happy moments”; “One day I told my analyst, ‘I don’t take any pleasure in what I have,’ and I wept”; “My memories, good and bad, are sad in the way dead things are sad.”

Edouard Levé handed in the manuscript of his fourth prose work, *Suicide*, to his editor at éditions P.O.L on October 5th, 2007, ten days before hanging himself in his apartment. The lugubrious nature of his photographs and writing aside, the act was not unexpected: he had been institutionalized several times, had attempted suicide before, and had even made a model of himself to have dangle from a noose for his photographic series *Fictions*, but the model broke and the image was never captured.

The ostensible subject of *Suicide* is a boyhood friend of Levé’s who was the victim of a pedophile priest and who shot himself in the roof of the mouth with a rifle. The book is written as a letter to this friend, now more than twenty years deceased; but the conceit’s tendentious nature quickly becomes clear. The dead man and Levé had not been close—indeed, Levé states that his friend’s significance lies precisely in his having taken his life, and it is soon apparent that the “you” to whom the sentences are addressed is a pretext for Levé to converse with a version of himself abstracted by the barrier of death, a “pre-posthumous” self, to use a term he employed to describe his own works.

A marked characteristic of *Suicide*, largely obscured in the English translation, is the reliance on the imperfect tense, which lends a weary pallor

to the past the narrator recounts and draws the subject's sorrows and his forceful truncation of them into sharper focus. There are no purely happy moments recalled in concrete detail. These positive summary memories, as they are referred to in clinical literature, thus have a nostalgic form that may contribute to the narrator's feeling of exile from them, his sense that happiness is bound inextricably to the extinct, and his association of longing with the possibility of his own disappearance.

The closing section of *Suicide* abandons the epistolary form, and is composed of a series of tercets limited, in Hannah Tennant-Moore's apposite phrase, to an inventory of "gradations of basic comfort":

Red irritates me
Black moves me
White calms me

Reading it, I was put in mind of Shannon Stirman and James Pennebaker's essay "Word Use in the Poetry of Suicidal and Non-Suicidal Poets," which found a preponderance of self-references across the work of poets who had committed suicide and a sharp reduction in the use of the words "we," "us," and "our" in the writings immediately preceding their deaths. In *Autoportrait*, the word "we" appears twenty-three times over 112 pages, the word "us" three times, the word "our" seven; the figures for *Suicide*, a work of similar length, are fifteen, five, and one, respectively, and allowance should be made for the generalized "we" of such phrases as, "Death closes the series of events that constitutes their lives. So we resign ourselves to finding a meaning for them," which are more a manner of speaking than an expression of shared sentiment with others.

I also recollected a moment when I myself was near suicide, for hours could not stop the onward rush of images that showed me taking my own life, and had to repeat time after time Wittgenstein's phrase "Death is not an event of life" in order to get through the night. Beyond the lulling effects of mere repetition, such elementary declaratives have a sheltering quality; assertion

may not be certainty, but at least it possesses the form a hypothetical certainty would take. The vacillation between the beckoning of living and death is a bitter humiliation that frequently depletes the psychological resilience necessary for continued survival. To his vanished friend, Levé writes, "Wavering made you suffer more than deciding did." The act of saying good-bye to oneself, the knowledge that the struggle to resist the enticement of nonexistence is done, may invoke an oddly pleasant assuagement of self-hatred. Perhaps only those who have stood at the edge of suicide recognize this as one of its most exquisite allurements.