

NIGHT PAPERS

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LABYRINTHITIS

— JOANNA FIDUCCIA

I. RADIO HOUR

Ecoutez... *Faites silence.* Robert Desnos bids you listen and be still, for the evening of Fantômas is beginning. It is November 3, 1933, and your rhapsode is as far away and near at hand as any voice on the radio — in this case, Radio Paris, which has marshaled its resources to present Desnos's "Complainte de Fantômas." A lyrical account of the crimes of the vagabond Fantômas, scheduled to coincide with the release of a new episode in the popular series by Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, Desnos's poem is an advertisement with an outsize avant-garde pedigree (Kurt Weill composed the background music; Antonin Artaud directed and read the role of Fantômas) that would induct him into minor radio personality fame.

The poet had been initiated into the blind art some three years earlier by a young entrepreneur and radio enthusiast by the name of Paul Deharme. Deharme, perhaps more than any of the other lapsed Surrealists that would follow in his path, was devoted to the radio's novel artistic possibilities. In March 1928, he published "Proposition pour un art radiophonique," a strangely matter-of-fact manifesto on the potentials of this new "wireless art," combining a semi-digested Freud with a list of techniques to produce visions in the listener — the use of the present indicative, background music, adherence to chronology, and so forth. These techniques were merely speculative; Deharme was laying out the rudiments of a new medium that, tragically, he would never develop. Deharme was killed in a car crash in 1934, leaving others like Desnos to keep beating his radiophonic drum. (And Desnos, in fact, would keep it up: following "Complainte," he was hired by the dramatist and satellite-Surrealist Armand Salacrou to create the radio ads for the Salacrou pharmaceutical empire, becoming one of the decade's most successful sloganeers behind such euphonic morsels as "Ricqlée, la mente forte qui reconforte," and "Suze" — of Cubist fame — "répare les forces qui s'usent.")

Desnos's premiere on the radio was also Deharme's doing: a broadcast on June 14, 1930 of his lecture on surrealist painting, "Initiation au surréalisme." The title, one suspects, might have pleased Deharme. Over the radio, the lecture became a physical and spiritual rite, binding listener to orator, initiate to elect. One not only hears of Surrealism, one becomes (part of) it.

Commonplaces for the consequences of listening — when we say, for instance, that we are "moved" or even "transported" by a song — point to the very physical dimension of this initiation. The ear is a channel through which we, as much as any sound, pass; it is an organ of induction as well as seduction. A voice whispered softly in the ear is both an erotic enticement



JONATHAN ALPEYRIE | Mokattan hills, Egypt, 2013

CHUM (for CATHERINE TAFT)

— BENJAMIN WEISSMAN

When I got to school there was a note on my desk that said, *hug a chum*, but I didn't know what a chum was and didn't feel it was a good idea to ask Miss Gomez because I didn't want her to think that I was not the smartest kid in the class so I kept my trap shut and thought super hard. I had to figure it out on my own. *Hug a chum* I said to my desk in a whispering voice, *hug a chum*. I just let the phrase sit there for a while to see if anything came up inside me. What was a chum? Nothing materialized in my mind except chopped up fish gore that my dad dumped over the side of our boat to lure sharks close so he could spear and hoist them onto the deck and then baseball bat them so we could have steaks for half a year. Chum was a tantalizing kind of shark bait of blood, guts, and membranes, profoundly not to my liking as an eater of most scary foods, but pretty much chocolate cake for a shark. No one had ever told us about other kinds of chum, what they were or what they did and how I could hug them.

Maybe chum was a badly planted tree that needed straightening and a little love tap, or water or another kind of attention I didn't know about. Or perhaps the chum was a sick or mistreated animal that might sustain itself and flourish with extra love. Something needed hugging but I was in full fog as to what. Maybe our teacher misspelled one of the words on the note, if the note was even from her. Maybe as one word *hugachum* meant something like the sound of a steam engine or a squishy pillow doll, or maybe it was a Flemish expression. We had just learned that Flemish people eat a fish stew cooked in beer with chocolate poured on top called Paars Donderdag (purple Thursday).

Or maybe this *hug a chum* idea was along the lines of the new, spiritually enlightening exercises we were doing at the beginning of P.E. with the visiting yoga teacher, Miss Perineum, like breathing through alternate nostrils or imagining a golden chicken on the horizon and/or inside the center of our chest.

Our regular teacher Miss Gomez was tall and beautiful. I love her so much I would die for her, but I am not alone in this feeling. Several other classmates felt similarly and would

sacrifice their lives to be first in line to hold her hand. Our teacher smells like powder donuts on some days. On other days, strawberry pie and lemon floor polish. Once she smelled like gasoline after slipping and falling while fueling her Scion. She was most vulnerable that day. A single lit match could've produced a Roman candle teacher.

The closest thing to a *chum* that I could think of was a *chub*, a fat person, so I walked up to Martin, an enormous boy made of various gelatins, sour cream, pastry dough and orange rind, and wrapped my arms around a third of him and said, hug a chum, but he began swinging downward with his fists like two soft mallets, not painful, producing giggles from me rather than cries of agony, so I let him go, hopped the fence behind the basketball courts, and fixed myself a fried egg sandwich on the boat while my dad wove a needle and thread through a red holey sock he was darning. I asked him what chum meant.

Is there another meaning, father?

It's just the shit the sharks eat, son, he said, nothing more. Don't let them tell you differently. If you're telling me your teachers are feeding you chum, or calling you chum, I'll be at the principal's desk in half an hour with a harpoon that has his name on it, and the harpoon will be pointed at his heart.

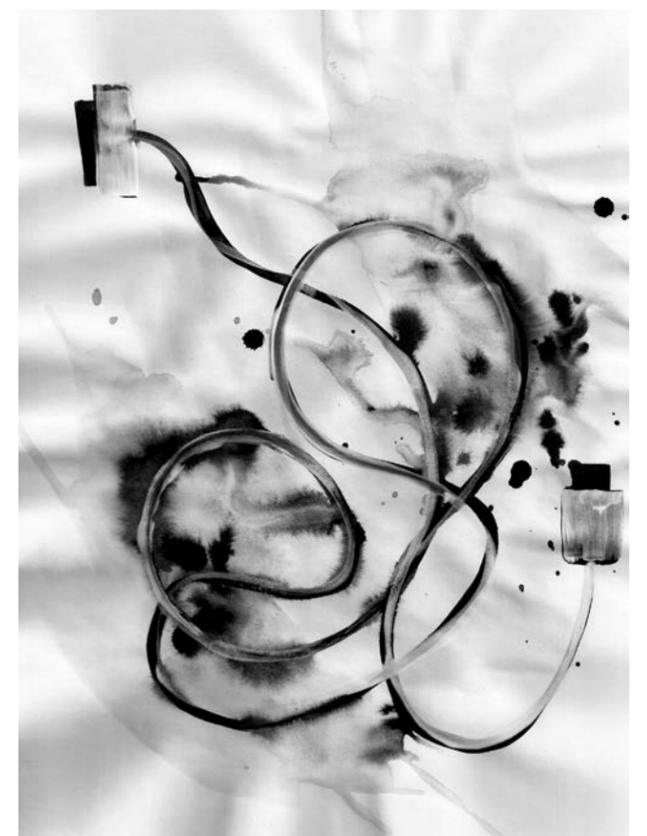
Why would the principal's name be on one of your harpoons, father?

Pardon the confusion son, I will write the principal's name metaphorically, or invisibly, on the tip of the harpoon, which is another way of saying that his face or heart or neck is my passionately intended target. Saying that my harpoon has his name on it just personalizes my warning, even celebrates it a little bit. It tells the principal that we mean business.

My father leaves no stone unturned. It's possible, he said biting off a thread, that a chum is in fact a very particular type homosexual or a person from a country on the other side of the equator. Or a turtle. Or a bum who sings choir from a trash can. He cleared his throat and coughed. Are you sure you read your teacher's note correctly?

I returned to school before lunch ended and found Miss Gomez in her office. Did you hug a chum? she asked. I tried to, I said, but I don't think I understood the assignment. Could you clarify it for me?

Absolutely, she said, and stood up, then took a step forward and wrapped her arms around me. She pressed her bosom into my face. She smelled like apricots. It's like this, sweetie. A chum is a friend and we hug our friends. ■



MICHAEL DOPP

and hypnotic device, and indeed, how could we distinguish between them? States of trance and of lust so much resemble one another. The ear: a crossing, a transversal, without agency or resistance. Listen. Be still.

II. VERTIGO

This passivity, in fact, figures centrally in the motif of the ear in literature and myth. Its endless receptivity makes the ear a vulnerable site, susceptible to persuasions and deceptions of every order. Consider the “leperous distillment,” the “juice of cursed hebenon in a vial” sluiced into the ears of poor dead Hamlet, or Othello at the mercy of Iago’s poisonous rumor. The ear cannot be stopped; noise-cancelling headphones simply overwhelm it. Deafness is the one privation that comes to seem like a kind of agency, a willed blockage in the tube of endless intake. But the ear, of course, is not just a funnel, and its operations — as seemingly out of conscious control as the beating of the heart — are lodged in a highly complex matrix of bone and tissue called the labyrinth. The labyrinth, or inner ear, consists of two parts: the osseous labyrinth, part hardened Mobius, part delicate nautilus, and the membranous labyrinth, a series of ducts and sacs within the bony cavities. Viral or bacterial infections of the inner ear are called “labyrinthitis,” and result in wholesale disruptions of the vestibular system, which determines our sense of motion and balance. Symptoms of labyrinthitis include tinnitus, hearing loss, and most significantly, vertigo. Disruptions of the labyrinth, in other words, are disorienting.

This slight adjustment to the received sense of the labyrinth — as the space of disorientation *tout court*, no disruptions necessary — reflects the development of the labyrinth itself. The original hedge mazes were unidirectional walking paths without any intention to mislead. King William III’s regime introduced the labyrinth of dead-ends and false paths, and the vogue crossed the channel to Versailles.

Curiously, however, the Sun King’s landscape folly was conceived as a pedagogical device as well as a disorientating park. Its many turns and cul-de-sacs were peppered with fountains, each representing one of Aesop’s fables. A dauphin who lost his bearings would thereby nonetheless find himself close to the labyrinth’s original meaning, as an allegory of the path to self-discovery. In this allegory, those who persevere eventually make it to the center of labyrinth, where they discover their true nature — the Minotaur, half-man and half-beast.

Significantly, however, the Minotaur has inverted the common zoning of beast and brain, for his body is a man’s, and his head, a bull’s. There is no cunning that can get you out of *that* labyrinth; your monstrosity is already in your head.

III. BOWELS

So they are strangely kindred structures, the labyrinth in the head and the labyrinth that overturns the head: outside the reach of ratiocination, perilous and passive all at once. But they are not the only labyrinths in the body, at least so far as the Surrealists were concerned. In 1936, the Surrealist philosopher Georges Bataille produced the first issue of *Acéphale*, a literary journal that shared its name with a secret society, whose object it was to produce the rebirth of myth through the rites of a thoroughly a-cephalic (headless, egalitarian) community. The cover illustration was drawn by André Masson. A delirious mascot of sorts, a Vitruvian man for the dissident Surrealist cosmology, standing with a dagger in one hand, a flaming heart in the other, astral nipples, and a death’s head at the groin. His bowels are exposed, and the snaking intestines echo the magazine’s logo, printed at the bottom left corner of the cover: a labyrinth.

The labyrinth enjoyed this prime of place on *Acéphale*’s cover as it rose to prominence in Bataille’s own thought. For

Bataille, the labyrinth was a figure for the very structure of our humanity—shapeless and structureless, unstable and entangled, and above all, far bigger than what should be contained by a single body (the average small intestine of an adult measures 23 feet long). Being, Bataille asserts in a 1937 text titled “The Labyrinth,” is “being in relation” to others, or more precisely, a shapeless, structureless mass of society to whom each individual is ineluctably connected. We search for the assurance of our being at the center of whatever concentrations and ties we produce with our fellows, seeking there some kind of totality, “a double pistil of sovereign and god” that, considering the

those myths were supposed to fortify us against: seduction, persuasion, deception, but also a loss of identity in the energy of the crowd — a place, we know from Edgar Allan Poe, of criminality. *Fantômas* is not far behind; nor are the leagues of fans that devoured his stories, and that tuned in to hear them eulogized by Desnos.

But the image of devouring, as the crowd rushes to consume another story by eye or by ear, signals perhaps what has seemed curiously absent in this labyrinthian anatomy before us: the mouth. The mouth, after all, is the first channel to take in the world (suckling, that is). But consider what a



metaphor, is also a nugget of shit.

IV. THE MOUTH – A POSTSCRIPT

The decorticated stomach of the *acéphale* shows “the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in others as a monster.” The self-discovery, the recognition of our own very labyrinthian nature, is a misrecognition of the self in the other, the other in the self. A monstrous trespass of the body. Put otherwise, the labyrinth is a figure for the projection of ourselves *outside* of ourselves, endlessly exporting what the other labyrinth in the ear has passively imported. It exposes the myths of contained and fully controllable bodies to the forces

confused organ that mouth is — consuming food and drink, but also spewing out language, and engaging in all the other more and less mentionable acts of mouths. The mouth, finally, can shut, just as Desnos demands it. *Faites silence*. The mouth gives and takes, sprouts teeth, loses them, sprouts them again. While the regenerating, bicursal mouth had already learned how to defend and express itself from our early age, the ear and intestine remained sensitive systems. They were the open straits that exposed us to the world, or that indicated that we were already very much a part of it. Our parents watched over them carefully. They sang softly in one, patrolled the other. And they nursed us through the abuses we suffered at their hands — the earaches and constipation, the infections. ■