

About Heaps
(On *Anamnesis*, by J. M. Cabané)
Arnau Pons

“There is no way out of trees by means of trees.”
Francis Ponge, “The Cycle of the Seasons,” *Taking The Side Of Things* (1942)

“This is how empathy and inner perception work hand in hand to give me myself to myself.”
Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917)

This entire heap of clothes and the darkness of the room are intended to express an internal experience. The painting – that which stains and soils the canvasses – is in conflict, negating itself, without disappearing completely. It only denies itself the right to proclaim its sovereignty. Anyone would think that it strives to occupy the place of the blood that could have stained these clothes, or the sweat that could have soaked them, or the urine, perhaps the phlegm, or the scratch of nails, of the scream, the crying. In the last trance. At the instant of imprisonment. Nevertheless, the heart of the painting is here, within the dark folds, because it flees from the canvass – or avoids it – to curl up and seek refuge in another configuration. It is an almost painful recollection that is also a costly abstinence. Because it no longer paints, rather it has unpainted. With anonymous clothing and rags.

(At any rate, the anonymity the artist confronts when he decides to work with these tatters and clothes taken from the lye, and now piled up, is doubtless the best path to access the historical event with which he now wants to overwhelm us, with an obstinate discretion.)

The painting, as we have said, rushes inside, and falls, and hides, and it introduces itself with a movement that debases it, without wanting to represent the staging of its own annihilation. In truth, this pile of clothes is the result of the cleaning and wiping of his utensils, his brushes, his hands, after days of work. Until perhaps the painting succeeds in telling the truth in the shadows. By turning itself into a shadow as well. Perhaps somewhat humiliated, although its humiliation has a regal quality.

After all, the man who has lived through this experience – the one captured here, in its interiority, and with an empathic lassitude, something that transcends it as it happens with the experience of extermination –, by the fact of being a painter, has committed himself to question his reason for being one when he confronts the historical transmission of a trip to Mauthausen.

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I have been asked to open the door and step into the isolated space selected for viewing and contemplation. I look and I go slowly around this heap of clothing and tatters. From

afar, I have had the impression of seeing a brain inside an urn. In spite of the fact that the artist tells me that it consists, in great part, of the rags that he uses day to day to wipe his brushes, I persist in imposing my first impression: in the splotches of paint that I can discern in this matted pile when I draw closer, walking in the darkness, carefully erased is all the stone age art of human pre-history. (I imagine myself inside a cave, since the space invites my doing so.) So that a target is created, a chromatic silence. The artist could have used, in my imagination, stolen clothes (let us say it without euphemisms: what is taken away from the victims prior to eliminating them). Because the clothes, even in a heap and emptied of the body, will speak, thrown here and there, of the body that was annihilated.

I weigh the difference between the artist's intention (to wipe his brush with *that* clothing) and my immediate perception (*that* clothing will erase the beginning of beginnings).

If I think about Lascaux, undoubtedly it is because of Bataille, due to the significance of the name Lascaux associated with Bataille, but I could not speak, in fact, about just any cave painting. It was Bataille who said, "Auschwitz is the fact and sign of mankind. Man's image is henceforth inseparable from a gas chamber."

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Returning to where I was – facing the blank page –, what comes to memory is the final scene in the movie *Garage Olimpo* (Argentina, 1999) by Marco Bechis: María, the leading actress, wearing Adriana's dress, the disappeared.

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I cite here from two publications around the same time in Catalonia; one is from actual testimony, the other is most likely genuine as well:

"When you slept on the ground sometimes they died next to you, and that was good, because you would use the dead as pillows, and that way, you could sleep on something soft."

Declaration by a deportee reported by Montserrat Roig,
Catalans in Nazi Death Camps (1977)

"When Meir died, I kept him in the bed for two days. I made them believe that he was still sick and that way I could eat his soup. At night, it wasn't so uncomfortable with him dead, because he didn't urinate on himself anymore."

Mercè Rodoreda, "Night and Fog," from *It Seemed Like Silk and Other Stories* (1978)
(first published in *La nova revista*, Mexico, 1947)

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Now I must ask myself what kind of trope the artists applies to the term anamnesis when he attempts to implicate us in this precise work, that is, us, we who have not been there either to die or survive, we who do not come from that place.

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It is common knowledge that at the front door there was a peephole that allowed them to survey the efficacy of the mechanism.

(“It is not genocide, which has precedent in history, rather administrative crime and industrial slaughter that makes it modern crime par excellence. Carried out by an anonymous bureaucracy, it hinders the purpose of justice, which cannot issue collective punishment. The weapon of the crime in itself – the gas chambers – is 'an instrument of anonymous assassination,' writes Vidal-Naquet. 'It's about the same situation provoked by Odysseus when he adopts the name No one and the unfortunate Polyphemus says that No one has blinded him [...] No one is the executioner because everyone is part of the assassination and that facilitates its denial.’” Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman, *In Praise of Disobedience*.)

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Vladimir: Where are all the corpses from?

Estragon: These skeletons

Vladimir: Tell me that.

Estragon: True.

Vladimir: We must have thought a little.

Estragon: At the very beginning.

Vladimir: A charnel-house! A charnel-house!

Estragon: You don't have to look.

Vladimir: You can't help looking.

Estragon: True.

Vladimir: Try as one may.

[...]

Estragon: We should turn resolutely towards Nature.

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And now it would seem that the platonic cave is directed toward a historic event, toward a concrete reference. To protect it. (Talking about this is complicated.)

However, to be accurate, perhaps it's not Plato's, but rather the Lascaux cave. (On the

walls, there would only be vestiges of pigment and smoke, a sort of soil or soot. And evidence of scrubbing obsessively, of an erasure.)

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“Afterwards, the deportees smelled the gas and they rushed in savage panic toward the great metal door, piling up and forming one blue pyramid, sticky and stained with blood, completely clenched and with their nails digging into each other, even after they were dead.”

Gerhard Reitlinger, *The Final Solution.*
Hitler's attempted extermination of European Jewry, 1939-1945

“The bodies do not lie strewn around the room, they are in a heap that reaches all the way to the ceiling of the chamber. The explanation is that the gas floods the lower layers first, and rises slowly up.”

Miklos Nyiszli, “I Was Dr. Mengele's Assistant,
A Doctor's Eyewitness Account,”
Les temps modernes 6, 1951, number 65-66 (March-April)

“They move at a slow, tired pace... They immediately discover the water sprinklers located in the yard. Then, they take the saucepans and bowls out of the suitcases. The lines break up, while they push each other, trying to get close to the sprinklers and fill the receptacles... [The SS] wait peaceably until they have all quenched their thirst and filled the receptacles.”

Miklos Nyiszli, *ibid*

“The bodies lie in narrow rows [...]. From the nose, mouth, and the flesh abraded by the friction, blood discharges and mixes with the water that runs through the trenches that have been excavated for this purpose in the cement floor.”

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TENEBRAE

We are near, Lord,
near and at hand.

Handled already, Lord,
clawed and clawing as though
the body of each of us were

your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.

Wind-awry we went there,
went there to bend
over hollow and ditch.

To be watered we went there, Lord.

It was blood, it was
what you shed, Lord.

It gleamed.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Our eyes and our mouths are open and empty, Lord.
We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are near.

From *Speech-Grille, and Selected Poems*, by Paul Celan