Anabasis of Terror: Trying (Not) to Understand

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The sole and only work and deed accomplished by universal freedom is therefore death—a death that achieves nothing, embraces nothing within its grasp; for what is negated is the unachieved, unfulfilled punctual entity of the absolutely free self. It is thus the most cold-blooded and meaningless death of all, with no more significance than cleaving a head of cabbage or swallowing a draught of water

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

I have behind me two or three coffins for which I will never forgive anyone.

Antonin Artaud, *Rodez Notebooks*

It is hard to imagine a more horrid and absurd act than the terrorist attack of May 30th 1972 at Lod Airport in Israel. Three Japanese kamikazes 5000 miles from home shot blindly into a crowd—mostly made up of Puerto Rican Catholics on a pilgrimage—in the name of the Palestinian cause and of world revolution. One is not quite sure whether to break into laughter or tears, so much does ridiculousness clash here with bloody abjection. So one wavers between Dostoyevskian moral repulsion ("Demons!") and Monty Pythonesque disbelief (the Judean People's Front in *The Life of Brian* comes to mind).

But one need only spend a little more time thinking about the twenty-six victims of that attack, the vile purges that preceded it within the United Red Army, their fascination with violence, and their total confusion between reality and images, between internationalism and nationalism, between freedom and death, to stop laughing altogether. These tragic excesses—not of a generation but of a few lost Japanese—are not fascinating; they are wicked, lamentable. A lament that forces us, symmetrically, to abandon any overly moral perspective. Because after all, in their own way these young members of the Japanese Red Army did not lack morality. At least, they lacked none of the courage, selflessness, loyalty to community, solidarity, sense of sacrifice and other virtues that are the stuff of the most common morals. And it is hard not to detect a profound moral regret in the fact that after this attack, none of their "operations" aimed to kill, as they got lost instead in pure terrorist spectacles. Search as one might, interpretation will always reach a dead

end. There will be no "perfect" scumbags nor even "banal" scumbags, in Hannah Arendt's sense of the word. So these terrorists do not inspire laughter any more than do their victims, because like them, they do not make good objects of mockery. The situation is a little more serious than that.

Here it is rather Hegel's words describing revolutionary Terror that ring truer than ever: their liberation and revolution ideal was nothing but an ideal devoid of content, without mediation, a confusion between images and reality, feelings and reason, deprived of all feeling and all dialectical thought, which could only lead to "the most cold-blooded and meaningless death," in reality as well as in images. In other words, the Lod attack and the whole associated story of the Japanese Red Army are not intolerable for aesthetic or moral reasons, but because they stem from a political sensibility and mindset that are essentially impatient. Indeed, as Hegel showed persuasively, beyond all morality, *impatient* sentimentality is the absolute worst political fault, much worse even than patient, well-considered Machiavellian cruelty. It is a disaster for the mind, taking the apparently highest and most generous thought of universality and reducing it to the most insignificant particularity. And it is also a disaster for the body, reduced at worst to the level of an obstacle without importance, at best to the level of an image without real content.

As true as Hegel's judgment may seem, it is not necessarily wholly adequate for today's world. First, because he could only formulate it after the event, from the perspective of a subsequent reconciliation between abstract freedom and concrete moral community, specifically the Empire, then the Hegelian constitutional state. But which subsequent reconciliation enables us to speak of those terrorist attacks of the 1970s? What have the Palestinian question and the chances for peace in the Israeli-Arab conflict become if not an endless despair? What has terrorism become today if not a sinister profession of the future? And if the revolutionary perspective has been discredited by bloody, loathsome acts, what has become of the thought on its underlying causes—oppression, inequality, poverty, exploitation?

Second, and most importantly, because Hegel claims to fully understand the terrorist act. That fury of abstract universality has a determined place in his system as a pause in the life of the spirit which must be overcome. Yet who can really claim to understand terrorism, no longer of the State but by various splinter groups? Claiming to fully understand it amounts to either condemning or excusing it,

that is, contenting oneself to judge and therefore not really understanding anything at all.

In this respect, a more fruitful approach might be the kind taken by Eric Baudelaire, who aims to understand and not to understand at the same time—to understand up to the point that one no longer understands—and also to show, refusing to understand or explain, so that with a dreadful feeling of confusion we are surprised to find ourselves understanding, discovering a subtle sympathy, telling ourselves that maybe monstrosity is our shared condition. He sets before us a kind of ever-divided desire: the desire to understand and to not understand, the desire to understand what we do not understand and the desire not to understand what we are afraid of understanding all too well. Or it could be written: the desire (not) to understand, in its threefold sense—to see, to hear, and to share.

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Where does this desire come from, if it rejects from the start not just all fascination, all nostalgia, but also any elevated position from which to pronounce "the" truth of the past? Perhaps from today, actually, from our latter-day reluctance to understand and not understand what happened and what was lost in those years of powder and lead. What went off the rails? Where? Why? We do not know. The unpardonable criminal failure of those young idealists of yesterday in no way clears us of our own failure, our current inability to offer anything more than talk of an unthinkable new departure and an impossible return. This could almost be expressed as a fake Zen proverb: the certainty that someone else is lost does not in any way guarantee that we have found ourselves, nor even that we have the ability at least to find ourselves.

Taking up the profound intuition of Alain Badiou, who sees in *Anabasis*—understood as an embarking, a wandering and a return—one of the possible symbols of the century that has (or has not) just ended, Eric Baudelaire suggests that we take another look at one of the movements that drove this modern form of anabasis to one of its highest levels of insanity: the Japanese Red Army.

It is a matter of being precise, however. Not about the idea of insanity, which explains both nothing and too much, but about this very notion of anabasis. Because what exactly is it about here? The anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu and that of Masao Adachi is, in truth, much more literal than Alan Badiou's. His is a metaphor for

a century's wandering and returning, symbolizing the poetic space opened between Saint-John Perse's lyrical anabasis and Paul Celan's tragic anabasis. Eric Baudelaire is by contrast more mistrustful of poetry and metaphor. It is no refusal, so much are his silkscreen prints and his tracking shots of Tokyo and Beirut fraught with tragic poetic richness; yet more mistrustful. Or put otherwise: he is naturally on Celan's side, deaf to the heavy pathos of the likes of Saint-John Perse. His anabasis does not try prophetically to speak the truth of a century, but circles around absent images of a crime, gropes among its traces, and focuses on those who were not so much actors as spectators of that atrocious expedition from Japan to Beirut and back again. A bit like in *Circumambulation*, one of his previous films, when he circled around Ground Zero with his camera: wanting to understand, circling, filming, wanting not to understand, refusing to see, his head lowered. And when it is a matter of anabasis, of a wandering and a return, maybe it is better to circle and film than to speak—the literality of images versus poetic metaphor.

For this reason, Eric Baudelaire is also much closer to Xenophon's text itself. You could even say that he follows its sequence more precisely. What in fact does this so-called "march of the Ten Thousand" entail?

First the departure elsewhere of young men from all of over Greece, thirsty for adventure, glory and money. The elsewhere of that period was Persia, geographically the present-day Middle East. But the goal was already ancillary, mercenary; they were helping Cyrus overthrow his brother, much in the way that, *mutatis mutandis*, the Japanese Red Army placed itself at the service of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). No romantic indulgence here—not the call of the desert, nor the call of the road to the unknown. *Anabasis* is primarily the story of an initial confusion between thirst for the outside and mercenary interest.

Next, a wandering, when Cyrus dies in the battle of Cunaxa and the Greek army finds itself lacking any plan or goal. Victory no longer means anything more than warding off defeat. Both groups suffer deep solitude, leading to arguments, division, treason. The destitution of an uprooted herd. And nostalgia for the kingdom of water (Greece? Japan?): "thalatta! thalatta!". And even worse, boredom. Xenophon is obviously not a great author. He loses himself in images, instead of getting down to construction and verisimilitude, and you get bored stiff reading his work, but it is doubtless a boredom worthy of what

the Greeks experienced as they spent months crisscrossing foreign lands in search of some sort of sanctuary from despair.

But this is not a neutral wandering. It is not an intoxicating journey or a series of picaresque encounters, but an organized, compulsory crime. What can a routed army survive on if not plunder, pillage and murder? Even Xenophon could not hide this. At heart, *Anabasis* is the story of crimes that are paradoxically both necessary and pointless; a very strange war of conquest that has suddenly become defensive, the defense of self outside oneself, hunted conquerors, compulsory criminals that dream they are glorious heroes.

Hence the return. But it was far from being an organized retreat, however much Xenophon may have showered himself with praise at the time (his genius, his know-how, his prudence). It was more of a chaotic flight. How many men had set out? How many returned? *Anabasis* is a return to the same thing, worse off; it is the sterile dialectic of an enthusiasm and a disappointment that lead back to the point of departure, only burdened by a few more deaths and regrets. And even a collapse: returning not to one's city steeped in glory, but instead home to Mother, or to no one if she is already in prison. *Anabasis* is not the tale of a ruin of the ruined, but of a ruin of ruiners, of people who are the chief architects of their own ruin. Once again, Xenophon is no Homer, and *Anabasis* is the poor man's *Odyssey*.

Finally, an apology, a perpetual justification. No matter what some specialists say, *Anabasis* is essentially an exercise in self-justification. And there is no reason to reproach it for this, so well do we understand why. After surviving one's own rout, what destiny can one hope for other than having to endlessly justify, to keep mulling over one's crime, its necessity, the error it represents, and to bunker down behind one's initial noble reasons? Especially when this justification coincides with a much greater rout, the collapse of Athens. Over subsequent centuries, Athenians were to recognize themselves in this story, which came to symbolize their destiny, and *Anabasis* was to enjoy considerable success. Understood in terms of its historical reception, it is thus no longer simply the tale of a few lost youths, but more the story of their rout at the heart of an even greater rout that was to mark the end of an era. Ruin within ruin, Athenians of yesterday just like people in today's societies who are no longer quite sure who is manipulating who, or even for what reason (a past or a future? a private image or a collective destiny?). You would think that

not only the failure but its vain justification had been—in itself and in face of an even greater failure—part of the plan all along.

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There is no question then of giving in to a romanticization of anabasis, ancient or modern, nor to an unequivocal, too comfortable condemnation of its actors. They certainly had a wretched homecoming as criminals without glory, but we ourselves are still wandering, away from the scene of who knows what new and even viler crimes.

What is the good of such a realization? Is it nihilistic despair, or the same old song about impotent youth, forever spectators of a past that eludes them as much as the present? Maybe not, since this is where everything turns around, where we are seized by vertigo. Eric Baudelaire's exhibition, in fact, is not a political analysis, it is an art exhibition. We are not dealing primarily with ideas, but with images and voices, images that are indirect, clouded, controlled, and manipulated in both senses of the word. Raw voices, neither judged nor decrypted (in the name of which higher code?). One cannot help thinking of the primitive gestures of contemporary art: of Duchamp diverting common objects and images, of Malevitch melting all figures into the abstraction of color. And of its original purpose: saving the concrete by means of diversion and abstraction (which no longer has anything to do with philosophical abstraction); saving the beauty of the world and the landscape by refusing its human, all too human aestheticization; saving art by denying it. In short, going back to an entirely different anabasis, that of contemporary art, which never stops searching for something new in the point of rout that leads to a return, a reprise, a remake.

So is this the vertigo of analogy, as Jacques Bouveresse would say? An infinitely doubtful vertigo that will end up placing the indistinct suffering of men, all men—Jews, Palestinians, Israelis, Japanese, Greeks, Puerto Ricans—at the service of artists? Absolutely not.

First, because if we accept Gerard Wacjman's assertion in *L'Objet du siècle* (The Object of the Century) that contemporary art begins with Duchamp and Malevitch, we have no choice but to recognize that the anabasis image has a much longer history in art than in politics. If art's interest in this image gives it meaning today, it is perhaps not so much as a lifeline, but as a disturbing mirror that shows a reflection of one's time and at least provides food for thought. It was neither politics nor poetry that first modernized that ancient image

of the anabasis, it was the visual artist working with images, conscious of their perpetual fall and resurrection in a world closed anew.

Moreover, it is hard to deny that in a sense today we live in societies of widespread anabasis where in art, politics and science, in the most public lives as well as the most private, we hear people speaking of nothing but that: of new departures and returns, of conquests and quagmires, of the loss and rediscovery of meaning.

Finally, because if we concede that the greatest wisdom consists in more than just "not to ridicule, not to bewail, not to scorn," to use Spinoza's words, but also not to understand as Spinoza would rather have wished, only to convey everything that has happened, with all of the nebulousness and the nagging questions the past entails, then we have no choice but to recognize that art makes use of the past as much as it does not make use of it, makes use of the present as much as it diverts from it to find something new.

In any case, latching onto this anabasis image at least seems a little more interesting than speaking of a postmodern world, the end of history or a clash of civilizations. It allows us to avoid sterile contrasts between fervor and brooding. We have no choice, our age has set itself up between the two, and contemporary art was the first to understand this. And above all, this liberates us from all nostalgia for the past as well as all hope for a more glorious future. Our age is not a great one, and its art must therefore forbid itself from trying to be the greatest art, true art in the Hegelian sense or propaganda art like that of the last thurifiers of revolutionary terrorism. But although this lucid realization can liberate us from all of the garbage of grandeur—glory, fanaticism, sacrifice, war—the modest art of today, which Eric Baudelaire's work embodies rigorously, deserves its fair measure of thanks. It is an art of peace, of questions, and a call for more sharing, instead of more judgment and conflict.