

Save Us or We Perish. We Are Subjects. Take Us Aboard.

Johnny Rodger

In his short prose pastiche, ‘Sailing to Oblivium’, the Ukrainian-Russian-Scottish artist Yusef Szafki reverses the direction of Yeats’s spiritual journey in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’.¹ The sea-journey west to the setting sun (rather than east to Byzantium), of course, puts us in mind of the ever-growing numbers of flimsy vessels – increasing even during the lockdown months – packed with folk, at once hopeful and desperate, navigating their way west through difficult waters in the Mediterranean and English Channel. It is the emblematic journey of our times, and it’s not too inhumane to understand that desperate pitch across the high seas as a definite form of critique.

This rewriting allows us to figure the post-modern epistemological crisis of some thirty to forty years back as a merely parochial preliminary, a regional rehearsal even, for the post-Covid age. In Yeats’s poem, as in post-modernism, an old and tired civilisation, exhausted with its own rational strictures, seeks rejuvenation — and spiritual life — in the preservation and re proliferation of the classical forms. That is to say, in Fredric Jameson’s simulacra and Jean-François Lyotard’s rejection of supposed universal reason. This was merely parochial, as the Nigerian writer Dennis Ekpo had it in 1987:

the logical consequences of the absurd self-inflation that the European subjectivity had undergone [...] and for cultures (such as ours) that neither absolutized, i.e. deified human reason, nor saw the necessity for it in the present, the post-modern project [...] cannot at all be felt like the cultural and epistemological earthquake that it appears for the European man.²

In the post-Covid era, however, we exchange the postmodern as a solely European collapse of rationality into the local ‘anything goes’, for a truly global scale collapse of epistemological ground into pandemonium, symptomized by, amongst other things, climate change denial and cynical obstructions of immunological best practice.

As the sun finally sets with us in that critical collapse, sailing away from, rather than towards, the centre of Empire, do we go down with it into Epistimmersion in those western waters, and figure a rewriting of Bruno Latour’s title as ‘We Never Were Post-modern’?³ And does the *Pandemonium* entail, as per Szafki, some necessary and critical oblivion?

The City of Pandaemonium⁴ is far closer to us now than it has ever been. So close that no-one can say they cannot see it, cannot attempt the short crossing. That's not simply an effect of technology, though. You still have to sail to reach it, and the journey is done in the flimsiest, leakiest and most overcrowded of vessels. You navigate through time, through all times, through space, through heaps of material, of stuff, of things. You have to sail through a great tsunami of shit. You drift in swelling tides of blood. But you know, when you arrive in the lapping shallows of dollar bills, the gently splashing wavelets of counterfeit dollars, that you are almost grounded on the destined shore.

There are so many golden testimonies of the weighing of the rusty ethnic anchor, and the setting of the keen prow to the wine dark sea, that you can't say you don't know it's happening now and forever. From Achaea's fair-haired slaving warriors at full-bellied pursuit to wreck the oriental home-wreckers' home, to the West-English-African pilot Akomfrah on the vertiginous foam, bellowing down at the barbarians on the deck from his wheelhouse: 'We act as though the current refugee crisis is an isolated incident, but actually flight and migration has defined modernity since the 14th century.'⁵

We cannot pretend we do not know.

Yet the secular, as we *do* know, simply denotes when the particular war of wars happened, and after that one war, when the houses are burned and the walls pushed over in the dust, the people go down to the shore. There, the sea teaches us, one and all, that rusting and forgetting and dying and falling and drowning are perhaps all in the same family way. As Hito, not Hirohito tells us, falling without finality feels like floating, and 'whole societies around you may actually feel like perfect stasis – as if history and time have ended and you can't even remember that time ever moved forwards ... while falling people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people.'⁶ Sailing to Oblivium then, and not always taking the same tack.

But forgetting the way is not the same as not knowing the path as well-tread.

So, floundering, the flatfish, with a flick of its tail, stirs up a flurry of grit and brine. Where is the ground, the path there? It darts from our approach and it's difficult to tell if it's swimming, walking or tunnelling. It is neither at nor on the bottom; there is no end to this bottoming; and it is of the bottom. We plunge into the refugitive waters of forgetfulness, plummeting to depths with a heart of stone.

We say, we do not know ...

Yet where there is a subject, then, we know of the Akomfrah centuries: the history that Hito has stopped, that never stopped going on: the burning of

the houses, the rooting out of the people, the stopping up of their mouths, of their songs, of their poetry; the stopping of their very – I can't breathe! – and, still, their poets keep telling us, over our dastard bastard number of centuries and stopped histories, of that journey of horror, where even 'things', as they fall, try to leap aboard and become people:

*It was no joke to steer in that sea
When the high tops to miss
Seemed almost to hear her keel scrape
The shelly abyss!
The sea churning and lashing itself
In maniacal states
The wild wealth and the pounding waves
And the ship's nose
Scattering their white brains callous
Through the billows
They shouted to us loudly, dreadfully,
The piteous word:
'Save us or we perish. We are subjects.
Take us aboard'
Small fish that were in the waters
Murderously churned
Floated on the top without number
White bellies upturned,
The stones and shells of the floor even
Came to the top
Torn by all grabbing motion
That would not stop.
The whole sea was a foul porridge
Full of red scum
With the blood and ordure of the beasts,
Ruddy, ghum,
While screaming with their gill-less mouths
Their jaws agape
Even the air's abyss was full of fiends
That had no shape,
With the paws and tails of great
Gruesome to hear monsters
Were the screeching towers ...⁷*

Meanwhile, on the far shore, the Stygian Council of Pandaemonium meets in their free and democratic towered chamber made of solid gold, and at a signal they are suddenly transformed from devils of gigantesque stature to the tiniest dwarves.⁸ There are no moral subjects in Pandaemonium, and objects

will no longer stay where they were put. Our perspective has ‘murderously churned’. Even in our oblivion we cannot say we do not know.

Notes

¹ F.N. O’Gafferty, *Helsinki (not the Town)* (Dualchas, 1995), pp. 8-18.

² Denis Ekpo, ‘Towards a Post-Africanism: Contemporary African Thought and Postmodernism’, *Textual Practice* 9.1 (1995), pp. 121-35 (p. 121).

³ Bruno Latour, *We Never Have Been Modern* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁴ ‘Pandaemonium’ (literally of all the devils) was coined by Milton as the name for the capital city of Hell in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, eds. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and John Akomfrah, ‘I haven’t destroyed this country. There is no reason other immigrants would’, *The Guardian*, 7 January 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jan/07/john-akomfrah-vertical-sea-arnolfini-bristol-lisson-gallery-london-migration>> [accessed 20 May 2024].

⁶ Hito Steyerl, ‘In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective’, in Hito

Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Sternberg Press, 2012), pp. 12-30 (p. 13).

⁷ Excerpt from MacMhaighstir Alasdair’s long Gaelic poem *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill*, trans. Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Complete Poems. Vol 1* (Penguin, 1985), pp. 529-30. Written in the 1750s while MacMhaighstir Alasdair was still a fugitive from the British Army after the failed Jacobite Rising in 1745, the poem documents the short crossing by Atlantic Ocean from Scotland to Ireland, written during the period of the genocide of the Gaels after the war, when the language, traditional dress and music of the Gael were proscribed by the British government on pain of death, and just at the beginning of the Highland Clearances, when so many Gaelic peasants were cleared from their ancestral lands and often forced or necessitated to sail across the Atlantic away from their homes as indentured servants.

⁸ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II, *passim*, the description of the debate at the council of the daemons.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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