

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

From Darfur to the Loire with Ousmane to begin

Claude Mouchard

Who expects a judgment from you about
this stranger?
And if you give it freely,
walk then night after night
with his sores on your feet, walk on, and don't come back.

Ingeborg Bachmannⁱ

“go”: he makes a cutting gesture with his hand in the white air. For months now, on a regular basis, we have been talking — in the kitchen usually. Have I made him believe that on top of the three or four years of deprivation he has gone through we would be able, as long as he is living with us and we take the time we need, to lay down words day after day, like the soothing fold of a blanket?

“Go, get moving.” With his earthy-bitter voice, and his arm (dark silhouette against the light), he mimes those who free you or chase you away. In a street, back then, in Libya. Or, after an overnight police custody, in a street of Paris or Orléans. Or at the door of a detention center, on a road in the Orléans forest, miles away from anything (“What do I do?” he asked the policeman. “Not my problem... Come on, get going.”)

“Go, get...” He expels into the air sentences that, for months, have stayed stuck in him like stings.

But suddenly, it is he who, standing in front of the luminous glass door, facing me, addresses these words to himself: **“Go, get moving.”**

“Go...” He has nowhere to go, except to this family of “whites” (as he said to me), this house where he has been living for nearly a year now, this kitchen...

Have we given him false hopes? Papers, work: his or our helplessness — administratively maintained — is too likely to become definitive.

“Here,” he says, plunking himself down again in the chair, **“this is not a life”** — or (I’m transcribing) **“not my a-life.”**

“Claude,” he says, looking at the gray tiles, **“I’m going to leave.”** Where for? To risk disappearing in a Khartoum prison? Or, if he gets out after several months, to try to find again his vanished mother and sisters... or just, perhaps, the devastated site of his village, or the remnants of his house?

“Here,” he hammers — and I’ll have nothing to answer —, **this is not-my-a-life.**

Words of Ousmane — or O. — exiled from Darfur...

Why did I begin with these — among so many others, from his mouth, which I have been hearing for almost a year now, and which I keep (as I’m completing these very lines) hearing still?

He had said them weeks ago... But until now they had remained suspended in the air — imminent. It’s only very recently — **May 20, 2008** — that I decided to write them down — or, by my hands, to let them fall, black.

Jot down what O. says, for the year, almost, that he has been living here and regularly coming to talk — in the late afternoon, in the kitchen —, it bothers me to do it while he speaks. He hesitates, stumbling less because of gaps in his vocabulary or breaks in his syntax than because of his rough pronunciation. Then all of a sudden his sentences rush out, and now, on the cluttered table (newspapers, vegetables, crumbs), I can't find anything to write on; I grab a newspaper scrap, or a torn envelope, a pencil that's lying around — to end up barely scribbling, sideways, on the sly, sheepish.

And I am loath to interrupt him. Still, shouldn't I re-pronounce his words, or send his sentences back to him, recomposed?

O. often interrupts himself, his face turned toward the ground.

If he suddenly raises his eyes, I get embarrassed to be caught looking at him too intently. And what would he think if he had access to sentences like these, which describe him?

With his index finger he scratches the wood-frame — rough varnish peeling off, pine fibers — of the table (the top is enameled metal: the style of a good thirty years ago).

Noises coming, then, through the window panes — changing with the hours or the seasons. Wind, small bell hanging from a corner of the kitchen's low roof... Or, coming through the half-open garden door, chickadee cries, needle-like... Or...

But what is it, emanating from his existence, near-mute for so long, as well as from mine, often verbose, that thickens above the table, between our faces? A double, redoubled, helplessness.

Sometimes, I drop the pencil, give up...

I'm no longer able to take notes whenever, at sunset (he is about to leave: he never accepts to eat here, he'd rather go to a bread line on the street, or to a soup kitchen, or will do his own "petite cuisine"), he starts speaking in outbursts.

Tomorrow, at the darkest moment before dawn, will certain words of his, beyond the ruptures of sleep, reappear, pressing me to transform them into my own sentences... though still, to be sure, mere sketches...?

"Go, get moving"... **"... not a life," "not-my-a-life...": words bone-tired** with helplessness, blows from the hand or the arm or the voice, against what masses surrounding them from all sides...

Those very words,
why did they have — at the moment (early May 2008) when I tried
and began to "set" (harsh and dumb, that word) the notes I'd taken
of our conversations for nearly a year —
to fly back in my face
and

at the risk of making me unable
to fulfill the promise I had made him months before, that of
making legible one day — but for whom? — what he would say

. . . without, it's true, his ever showing the slightest concern
about this project
except, just once, for a perhaps ironic remark
on my endless delays — comparable (thought I, vaguely sour)
to his sometimes missed appointments, his lapses or
oversights?

stop me?

But first, his name is not “Ousmane.”

It’s he who, suddenly, on April 23, 2008 (we have been talking for several months), asked me not to write his “real name” — the one that now appears on his papers.

What name should I give him in what I am writing, I asked? He suggested the name of a friend: Ousmane.

Wouldn’t that be a problem, or, who knows, dangerous, for the friend in question?

That friend, he tells me, is dead.

Ousmane was killed in October 2003, in northern Darfur, near El Fashir, as he was trying to cross into Libya.

Nobody, says O., really knows what happened. The whole group with which Ousmane was traveling, in “a big truck,” was killed. The killers were probably janjaweed, who must have known those travelers were headed for Libya, and who wanted “the people’s money for their crossings” — and the truck.

Everybody died, O. says again.

But Ousmane’s death, how was it known? He had an identity card (he who had lived in the city) that the police found.

The head of the village (“see, it’s not exactly the mayor, but it’s a bit like that”) was alerted, and he himself announced Ousmane’s death to the village, to the family: his father and mother, his wife, his two children.

“He was 35–36 when he died.

He had been my friend for almost two years.

He had gone to school, he was intelligent. He could have found work.

He had worked in Eastern Sudan, on the Red Sea coast, in a port. He got married there. Then he brought his wife all the way back to Western Sudan.

In the village, he didn’t live far from me. Not the same family, but the next one over. My grandfather knew his family.”

“GO” ... how to finally move forward?

Should I reconstitute “O”’s itinerary, and — at the cost of recomposing what he said to me about it (almost never speaking chronologically, but coming and going in time) — make the actual stages follow one another?

Or should the succession, here, reduce itself to that of the notes that I’ve been taking for months (with, often, a few hours or a night’s delay) from our conversations?

What he began to tell me about his nights outside,
if, by groping, I tried to relate something of it
once more,
it couldn’t be without incorporating what I heard saw or imagined
otherwise
months later, when following him on the banks of the Loire, that
day in November 2007 when we returned to the place (an empty
house squatted for a few days in the middle of winter) where there
were of course no longer any traces of his
but where he showed me others,
about the same, he said,
for him, in any case, too recognizable,
strange-familiar
*ephemeral bedding hollow, nests of dirty grass,
body marks, debris:*
*the very little left behind, when moving on once again in the morning,
by those who must always take everything with them in the streets
(blankets, a few rags, a minimum of food: nothing can stay [on the
premises] — the city workers are instructed to gather up or destroy
everything)*

*and each evening reshape everything again
in a minimal coil of self-care*

*and supposing it were a child of mine, adult, already old, who, for
some impossible reason, would be met in this way, exhausted, eyes
blank, just off a strange (or too familiar) street?*

(terror confounded with tenderness)

*time has collapsed before him he never stops falling in a ditch full of
black rotting leaves... (stench of an absolute sadness
in which to let oneself sink)*

*“LET’S GO, COME,” “you’re not going to stay there like that”... (and...
helplessness multiplies — he no longer wants anything — he is no
longer reachable)*

*“PLEASE COME” ... impossible to yank him away from this
decomposition of himself now too well known, too often tasted...
“COME, I’M BEGGING YOU.” “COME ON...”*

July 16 (first purely one-to-one conversation), beneath the vaguely inquisitive gaze of the café owner (who already recognizes us), I asked O. about his life in Darfur, before the violence — perpetrated by whom, exactly? this question will run through his later remarks — began or, at any rate, became intolerable.

He worked the fields, he said, with his father.
(No, I later said to myself taking up again and confronting some of my notes, his father, at that time, was dead. And in later conversations it was his grandfather he will be talking about. Or rather he must first have said: “grandmother” because, as he will explain, he was referring to his mother’s father.)

What they were growing, I have a hard time grasping. With his hand, he shows me the height of the plants.

We raised sheep. He dwelled on lambs, the possibility of selling them. He spoke of the market, and I did not really grasp what seemed important, though... a vehicle...

Suddenly O. slips in — like a quick extra message, and adding that it's the first time he is saying this (*will I soon, returning home, draw from these words some satisfaction, that of inspiring confidence... halo, pinkish, touched...*) — that he has thought about dying.

He talks again of the islands in the Loire, differently from last time — of one in particular that he likes. Beautiful, for him? “Yes.”

There, people come — young people, young couples — till late in the night, two, three in the morning... Friendly? “Yes, yes” — “I listen to them.”

After our meeting on July 16, a room, a “studio” recently fixed up (shower, toilet, kitchenette) that we rent, became available on the third floor of our house (vast old structure, going back at least two centuries).

We made the decision (which would stay in effect — dangerously abstract? — in all that would follow) to invite him to live there.

On July 23, from the Lutétia, where we met up again — once more with Hamid —, we are coming, crossing the Loire, toward the house. I show him the place. He says very quickly, or rather (face lowered, tears — of humiliation? — in his eyes) he has Hamid say: “I can't pay” (while Hamid translates, he makes a helpless gesture with both hands), “not even for water or electricity.”

Silence where, suddenly, in vital connections, is too deeply felt what is most banal.

Noises in the walls...

Soft trepidation of permanences-continuities, of costly connections maintained everywhere: drinking water coming up (on the banks of the Loire, the city had cut water...) or “wastewater” (sink, toilet) going down, electric cables (we see some, heavy and black, through this third floor’s window).

“Can’t” — “Of course.”

Silence. Swifts calling, or, in the light flowing in horizontally from outside, the streak of a swallow, flying and diving under the gutter nearby...

“I was afraid” ... “At the bottom of the big boat, I threw up, I was sweating, I thought I was going to die.”

Begin with sentences like these, heard weeks later?

A beginning in the middle of the Mediterranean (between Libya and France), in medias res...

Some pathos?

O. didn’t know what seasickness was. **“If someone gave me a cigarette, it would fall out of my mouth.”** He laughs.

“I thought maybe someone had given me something with the food. I was afraid to eat anymore. I was scared they would give us something and then throw us in the sea.”

“I thought I’d never see my family again, my mother, my sisters. I thought about my grandfather.”

It was in May 2004, and the crossing took 8–9 days: 2 days on a little boat (a fishing boat) (“made of plastic” — is that really what he said?) and 7 days on the big boat.

On the little boat where he ended up, 7 people: 4 Sudanese, 2 Somalis, 1 from Burkina-Faso (the only Francophone).

Then they end up on the big boat with other illegals — 40? 50?

On the big boat, of course, the illegals aren't all together. They are hidden in several places. In each of the cabins meant for the personnel's sleep, and designed for one or two people, 7 of us pile up.

We're afraid. People are yelling at us things we don't understand. We're worried that the police will come: everyone will go to prison then, even the people working on the boat.

No talking, no coughing, no sneezing.

(O. tries to recapture, to remember himself... He senses that I'm trying to get as close as I can to the feelings of that time.

"That guy, he's afraid," "me, I'm afraid," "that's not something normal."

"They took your cell phone, watch, lighter, identity papers if you have any, before you got in the small boat: "take nothing!"

We eat once a day.

How did you manage... to pee and to... — it's I who am asking..., I'm a little embarrassed — what terms should I use... Our words are always reserved, discreet. Embarrassed, but not too much, he laughs: we pee through a little hole (a porthole?). And for... the rest... inside plastic... and then you throw that also through the hole.

Upon arriving in France, taking another small boat, he had to slip on a "company" uniform.

After disembarking, around 9pm, we wait till three in the morning. We get a cup of coffee. A guy picks us up in a truck, takes us to the train station, pays for a ticket to Paris.

(Another time, or rather several other times, O. explained to me the smugglers' complicated guarantee system.)

If I got it right, in the train for Paris, there are only two of them left.

In Paris, it's morning, we are right there on the sidewalk, we don't know anything.

We'd like a "small favor," a little help, some information. We speak, several times, to people passing by. We always choose someone who looks like an Arab, who must speak Arabic. But he is always suspicious, doesn't have the time, doesn't know.

Another one is passing by, speaking through his cell phone: in Arabic. We try again, we speak to him.

He stops.

He listens.

Alone, Khaled?

first starts in the middle of distress, early July 2015... while waiting to really try, in the coming weeks, to raise, to lift up again, and balance but how?

*(a Kleist-like vault — letter to Wilhelmina —: the kind that holds in the air only because all of its stones want to fall simultaneously).
an excess of scraps, motley and monotonous, muddy, constantly crumbling*

immediate notes, “realist,” factual, taken day after day during the eight years of life “with Khaled,” innumerable conversations, brief graspings, fears and outbursts of anger, laughter, questions without answers, perpetual doubts about everything, but shot through by an irreducible certainty, that of a truth which we shared

*

“I don’t want to be alone” Khaled said

and those words, I will never stop hearing them...
and above all the muffled, gritty voice, so familiar — and loved

*

those words, was Khaled secretly afraid at the moment he pronounced them?
and me, should i have guessed the catastrophe that, unknowingly, they announced?

*

it was March 15, 2015 around 11 o’clock, he had just come down from his room

he was uncharacteristically wavering, his gaze turned inward
should I, I ask myself in writing these words, have been alerted?

he had sat in the old green armchair
and that is when he said them, these words: “I don’t want to be alone”

*

he was sitting there and so I became afraid that he would get cold
(the spring morning was gray and cold)

I took him back to his room (which he generally overheated),
I prepared a hot tea, brought it to him

and

*

Khaled Mahjoub Mansour, our Sudanese friend, my friend, died on
March 18, 2015, a little after 11pm, after three days in intensive care
at La Source hospital (south of Orléans)

Sunday morning March 15 a little after 11 he had been struck, in
front of me, by a heart attack

*

on Saturday, March 14, he had returned from a stay of almost two
months in Sudan.

stay during which he had undertaken an exhausting journey
*he said in our brief conversation (he was so tired) that Saturday
night*

from Khartoum to Nyala (his home town in Darfur) by truck (to
save the cost of the airplane?)

a journey halted by a long interruption because of who knew what
skirmishes.

so three or four days, in extreme heat... sometimes without water,
etc.

*

Saturday, March 14, around 3pm, after weeks of absence (and all
too rare calls from a cell phone... *regions often without any service,
he told me, at home, a few hours later...*)

he had finally called

he was at the Gare du Nord

“hello, hello, it’s Mansour the jerk”
he had obviously picked up again the thread of our ritual kidding
(ducks and jerks on that bank of the Loire where nine years before
he had slept outside during freezing nights).

*

it’s to your home that he wanted to return to die, our Senegalese
friend Samba Touré told me affectionately:
near you

how would I know ? certainty tears....

*

**we will never have had it then, that conversation I was waiting
for**

not only the day-to-day one, which we would have peacefully
resumed that Sunday, March 15th, and then in the days and weeks
and months and years that would have followed...

but another one too, a different,
supplementary one.

**the one that would have accompanied me,
the one through which Khaled would have sometimes led me
in the return
I wanted to start on
— which I am going to begin, surely, in the coming months,
but henceforth alone**

I won’t be able to rely on Khaled, on his words or, just as much, his
moments of silence
in order to get back

to so many shared minutes, all the exchanged words
or at least what I will have noted of them, day after day,
through the eight years he lived
here
in this house

*

over the last forty year or so, a number of “foreigners” have lived,
with us, in this vast and old house

for eight days or six months or four years or one month every year
or

Ibrahim the Ivoirian
Linda the American
Kim the Cambodian
Pedram, Farzam, Mahssa, Iranian brothers and sister.
briefly Angolan Laura.

our Japanese friend (who also became and remained Khaled’s
friend): Masatsugu

and Jinjia, from China,
and passing through, Gôzô... or... etc.

it’s with Khaled alone that the urge came to me (and came back to
me day after day during eight years)
or rather the stubborn will

to talk and to take notes
to talk regularly, obstinately,
with the intention, he knew it, of taking notes, not on the spot, but
the next day, after letting a night go by, but before daybreak

*

Khaled collapsed in my arms March 15 at 11 o'clock. His head, eyes rolled back, slumped; it weighed heavily in my hand; I felt his saliva leaking out.

I left him for a few seconds — to cry for help in the stairwell (toward our friends, Jinjia, Aya, toward Hélène).

I returned to this collapsed body, lifting it up again, and crying.

(and then very quickly the firemen, abrupt at first: “Who are you to him?,” then the EMS, a Sunday morning, a doctor, who happened to be black, suddenly speaking, for his part, cautiously and kindly: “it’s very bad...” “the heart”)

He died after three days of treatment by a team of doctors who were all attention, who did everything they could for him, for that body, which only artificial reflexes animated still, and at the same time, what is more, for us, dazed, and for his Sudanese friends, for the one who took on the task of telephoning his mother, in Khartoum.

It’s in this house where I am writing these few sentences that he died.

*

Write sentences like these, by what right? At the risk...

Khaled, what would he have thought — said: that’s what I catch myself wondering about having thought for a second that the creaking in the hall was his footsteps and that he was going to arrive half-surreptitiously... pretending to surprise me in front of the computer, the same one where I am writing these sentences.

Will I have taken possession of something — and down to his death.

Am I not in the process of drawing some benefit — pathos, staging — from what happened

as soon as I write it down, give it (perhaps) to be read?

*

No. Nothing of him was appropriated here, by us.

Nothing had been programmed, even though before him others...
There was absolute newness, and otherness. In the most ordinary multiplicity: that of lives having to endure and nourish themselves with ties, to make themselves substantial from them, and branch out.

Nothing had been programmed.

The event — two encounters (one was of Hélène and me with a whole group on the banks of the Loire, and the other Khaled initiated, recognizing Hélène in the street, coming up to her, etc.) — became the force of an interruption that could not be brought to a close and, precisely as such, became a part of our link, and its very power to the edge of death.

*

no “assimilation,” of course not
(I vomit that word, which is the ignoble, digestive, fecal one that politicians use when seeking adhesion from all the fools who identify with their self-adhesive coils).

*

Sentences like these, what are they hoping for? What effect are they trying for, on whom, or what?
They try, clumsily, to realize what happened.

Realize ?

Call forth some attention from very far, from the depths of time, in order to fold it back, blanket settling itself in folds over the instants whose having taken place one would softly utter

or rather, underneath that blanket, without those folds,

if those instants themselves just as they occurred would begin to speak, to say at last...

*

Three doorbell rings, after 10pm, Saturday night, strangely close together, hurried.

He was on the sidewalk in front of the house.

After an absence of almost two months, he could not find his keys.

We laughed.

Joy of being together again. Embraces.

I helped him to take up his two heavy suitcases, his bags.

When we got into his room, I couldn't help asking him: "how long has it been since the first time you came in here?"

— "Eight years, almost exactly"

— "And what did you think the first time?"

— "I was afraid not to find the right words."

*

"I don't want to be alone":

These words, I discovered a few moments later, were becoming those of a man who, for one instant more, wanted — would have wanted... (it was already too late) — not to enter alone into the aridity of death.

They were the words of a man becoming, in that instant, contemporaneous with all that he may have been: with each age he had lived, and, of course, with the child who long ago had searched, his gaze widened in the darkness, for a hand to hold.

*

*was I afraid? to have deceived myself? to have deceived him ?
yes, often,
but
one certainty will survive me (and I have tried or will try to
make it live in these sentences or in those that I could still
form later):*

*the reality of what happened here with Khaled contained —
tiny block, yet irreducible thanks to its extreme density — a
little of that without which
nothing any longer, nothing in the world, nothing ever
would count*

[...]

*

... he became here what no one else had been

[...]

*

“I was afraid not to find the right words.”

The right words, at the Poetry House. (He alone knew that it was about him).

“Yes, you take my words, you put in your own words, you find the right words.”

I’m afraid, I’m going to be afraid, in the coming months, to not find the words, the sentences and the breadth needed for what took place, unforgettable.

On the edge:

*words endowed with a reality other than that of words, or of a presence that would continuously metamorphose itself?
billions of human beings, I tell myself in the daybreak doubt, will have dreamed of that*

words, at least, slipping away from the one who will have said them

*and free and powerful enough
to turn back one after the other toward the individual who forms-formulates them and to lift him from the place where he is, where he knows or believes he is,*

*or rather, to simultaneously lift, in sweeping beats,
anyone, from his or her own place, from the fact or the belief of occupying a place,*

isn't that — against the background or in the element still of an enormous and multiple, unappeasable past — what poems (inheriting an immemorial delirium, and quite vainly) continue to attempt?

*but then isn't it — each time they try to make themselves real — necessary for them to take note of an obscene misery which is not only their own
but which they can be perhaps, in some instants, the most apt to reveal, let radiate, and make us finally recognize...
for... no one would know, then, which decomposing freedom?*

I did not expect, in the fear that engulfed the first hours of this July 8, 2015, before daybreak, to write sentences like these.

ⁱ Ingeborg Bachmann, "Spoken and Rumored," *Darkness Spoken*, tr. by Peter Filkins (Zephyr Press, 2006) 175.