

Une Vie en Vrac Andrew Zawacki

Nathalie Stephens, *The Sorrow And The Fast Of It*.
Nightboat Books, 2007.

“A voice,” Nathalie Stephens avows, “is an occurrence of madness.” Indeed, the specter of *la folie* is rampant in her latest book, *The Sorrow And The Fast Of It*, and it happens under a damning, double sign: there is the going mad, and there is the consciousness of it. The awareness is an intensification of the malady. As Michel Foucault and several of his notable contemporaries elaborated, with their sights trained on Sade, Lautréamont, Nietzsche, et al., writing is subjection to madness, and madness means the shutting down of the subject. Across the five untitled sections of an even hundred pages, Stephens struggles to negotiate what is precisely the impasse or impossibility of negotiation. “I liken speaking to an epitaph,” her speaker admits, thereby succinctly enacting her own demise. As she recollects, “I fancied myself the vestiges,” having suffered the onset of madness at age twelve. “I was born in the midst of demolition,” then, both literally (a church was being torn down nearby) and figuratively, one self emerging, cauterized but charred, like a phoenix from the adolescent flames of the other. Paradoxically, a “suicide begat me.”

Taking a cue from Shoshana Felman, “If madness is indeed an excess of remembrance,” Stephens avers, citing *Writing and Madness* in ghostly grayscale, “I have come to this embouchure to argue against remembering.” For Stephens, while madness certainly involves extreme levels of distress, it is not because everything passes, although that is true. Stephens is not haunted by *la recherche du temps perdu*, and her mode is far from elegiac. What wracks her book is less separation or absence, be they physical or temporal, traditionally the harbingers of melancholy, and less the fading memory that, according to the Proustian paradigm, invites sadness. To the contrary, Stephens revises the ventured thought that, “The distance was too great...,” by reversing it: “...Wasn’t great enough.” Apartness is not a problem in this book—claustrophobia is. Without sufficient remove, minus any fixed exterior point, life becomes infernal: “I went to Hell,” she recalls, where Cerberus guards the entrance to Lethe, river of oblivion. Unremittingly *in-fernal*, living inside “A body overful of wanting to forget,” Stephens’s speaker is overwhelmed by the immanence of immediate experience. “There is a

fever that overcomes,” she says calmly, seeking the consolation forgetting might bring. Her pain ushers not from desire for what’s been lost but from a hyperconsciousness of what she cannot lose. Fascinated and frustrated by the “thing pushed away that remains,” Stephens commits to the quasi-mystical eviscerations that Simone Weil calls decreation: “we are the thing that needs removing,” we “[n]ot so much want as want not.” Madness here is neither amnesia nor nostalgia, but the inverse incapacity to erase. Freighted by the sheer limitlessness of a conscious mind without remainder, Stephens needs the opposite of anamnesis or analysis; it is exorcism she solicits, the *via negativa*, “Surrender me,” vomiting and cutting out and bleeding.

Hence the proposal that it is “possible,” as Stephens puts it, “a book is less the appearance of a self than the disappearance, a grievance against a self.” The self already an unstable artifice chez Stephens, she does everything in her power to raze it further. “I would want to be manifold,” she avows in the conditional tense, perhaps acknowledging a utopian aspect to that hope. As her prose shuttles limpidly between “I” and “we,” the speaker, or speakers, cannot decide on her (or his, as we shall see shortly) or their identity or identities. An interdiction against simultaneity comes into play: “When we go to speak,” Stephens observes, “only one of us survives.” When I say “I,” that is, I am not “we,” and vice versa. This dichotomy reigns in the book, tyrannically. It becomes clear rather quickly that Stephens, however, is not interested whatsoever in discerning between singularity and plurality, let alone in choosing a side. Disobedient, she has decided not to decide, for she wants the self, and all its categorical exclusions, excluded categorically from her writing.

The dilemma between unity and multiplicity is not, however, the only existential knot that Stephens endeavors to untie: singularity is itself bifurcated, above all by gender. Intermittently in dialogue with ‘herself’ throughout the book, ‘Nathalie’ Stephens’s speaker is overheard talking to and about ‘Nathanaël.’ This alter ego, for lack of a better word—and the language’s lack of a better word says something about our failure to think the idea—is not new to Stephens’s repertoire, having shown up earlier in her 2003 volume *Je Nathanaël* (Book Thug, 2006). When “I” is Nathanaël, male, the book complains, I am not the female Nathalie. In this way, the self is both doubled and divided: “One of us is a wave,” claims Nathalie/ Nathanaël, “One of us is a shore. It matters little which.” That Stephens writes “l’entre-genre,” as her author’s note (or her authors’ note) specifies, is evident enough: not only is the obvious prose/ poetry overlap in effect, but deeper divisions, or non-divisions, within prose are also on display, as the essay, memoir, and

even the *récit* take turns leading. This fission or fusion of genres is characteristically French, of course, and in Stephens's case recalls most forcefully Hélène Cixous, who is likewise her forerunner in geographical and sexual alienation. So while Stephens does not share Dickinson's famous restriction, "They shut me up in Prose," she does express an excruciating aggravation about being incarcerated by femininity or masculinity. (Stephens's phrase, "There was a plank of wood and I laid my body on it," also recalls Dickinson: a plank in Reason broke.) Her entre-genre writing is thus explicitly inter-gender, too—*genre* is French for 'genre' and 'gender' alike—and her supplication to "Unletter me" is clearly related to the agony that surrounds being *either* Nathalie *or* Nathanaël; each is literally "Lettertorn" from the other, via the minimal difference between "-lie" and "-naël." (While she neglects to point it out, that 'genre' and 'gender' are separated by a mere letter is undoubtedly not lost on Stephens, who imbues her text with similar similarities, including "Sutured" and "Stuttering," "slave (Salve!)," and the trill "cove," "coveted," and "Covered.")

At times the speaker's (or the speakers') identity appears to be twofold. The gray half-tones, for instance, install a type of double-talk, whereby the narrator courts or shadowboxes some prior or posthumous, in any case *other*, self. The volume's epigraph, from Derrida, sets up this rapport, one interlocutor replying to another, "You're right, we are undoubtedly several, and I am not so alone as I sometimes say, when the complaint is torn from me and I devote myself, yet again, to seducing you." Stephens's rhetoric is itself frequently doubled, such as when she reports that, "The drowned are drowning," or asks, "Must I defend the maddened against the maddening?" Questions like, "Who do the wounded wound?" open quietly onto problems of tragedy, agency, and abandonment, as in Celan's lament that no one witnesses for the witness, or Luce Irigaray's related criticism that in the Hegelian account of Polynices's interment, no one is left to bury Antigone. Moreover, occasional rhyme intervenes to offset the loss of reason: pairs such as "defeat" and "complete," "retreat" and "replete," project their 'masculine' status, while "city" and "seditiously" come closer to 'feminine' rhyme; the presence of both together furthers the book's aspiration to partnership. Repetition occurs in *The Sorrow And The Fast Of It* on the level of the individual letter, as well, reinforcing the broader drive toward coupling, identification. In one early passage, no fewer than a dozen doublings of different letters (b, e, n, o, r, t) happen in about as many 'lines,' nearly half of them concerning 'l': collapse, billowing,

ville, saillie, spiralling. “Bodypart,” the text inveighs, reasserting the bond between corpus and corpus, “Letter by letter. Remove what’s missing.”

That anxiety about removal is significant. As ulterior selves, N and N cannot exist at once. Like an incarnation of *différance*, a differing and deferral rendered visceral rather than verbal, one version is relegated to acting as the other’s latent, postponed alternative. When Nathalie speaks, “Nathanaël has washed his hands of me.” Such slang connotes familiarity, and indeed a disturbing family romance pervades the book, evasive but inescapable, once in a while recounted in Old Testamental tones. The story, such as it is, begins with “the mother,” established as “the first place,” and involves an “unwelcome son” and “running daughters running.” At one point the “brother’s voice” is said to have come “after me,” while elsewhere the phantom voice announces, “You are the daughter and the son.” No matter the talismanic weight attending this prophecy of the first-person narrator’s duality, though, Stephens’s anguish resides in her normative reduction to a single—Simone de Beauvoir’s “second”—sex. (Alongside the idea that woman is “second” in the sense of inferiority, we understand that she does not coincide, temporally, with the “first.” Nathanaël, that is, then Nathalie—in that order. The dream of what Stephens articulates as “The same name spoken twice” turns out to be a pair of names, each spoken once.) “Whoever said Nathalie founded that trajectory...,” the speaker attests, asserting the legitimacy that the world accords a name, as well as the decisiveness that follows from it. “...Threaded me l’aporie,” she continues, “Then said pointing an ugliness a discrepancy. A girlness unremedied.” The important word here is aporia: the irresolution of contraries, or mutual incompatibility—if mutuality does not already hint at a collaboration excluded from the aporetic, which is precisely non-cooperation, the side-by-side of different orders of measure. “We divide into occurrences,” Stephens offers: the presence of Nathalie precludes that of Nathanaël, so *The Sorrow And The Fast Of It* becomes “the book of the boy many times displaced.”

The self is a de-centered site of possible, but never realized, contingencies, largely because the physical is determinate. “This is the literal construction of the body,” Stephens reports, pointing not only to the ‘lettered’ deviation between two names beginning Natha-, but also to the biological difference separating them. When Stephens writes of “Skin splitting plainly along two sides of a fine blade,” when she mentions “a long white scar from breastplate to groin,” that may well strike the reader as metaphorical. “It was the heart,” after all, “wanted bisecting.” But we might sense, too, a quite actual incision at issue. To the same degree that the third-person “It” of

Stephens's title is neither masculine nor feminine in declension, and her sexual politics dedicated to exchanging genders for neutrality, it is tempting, if dangerous, to read the excisions thematized in her text, the "maim" and "scar of skin," as a corporeal neutering. Certainly her alternate allusions to a limp "sexe" and a "breach" encourage somatic focus. (On this score, I am aware of the ambivalent status—whether appropriate or ironic—of the present review appearing in *How2*, designed to promote "innovative writing practices by women.") What Maurice Blanchot terms *le neutre*—existence as being exterior to oneself, impersonal toward one's own 'I,' such that it is not one's 'own' but precisely an 'it'—here assumes an obliquely genital form, or deformation, exceeding the self-less condition always already attendant on being. This volume's horizon, then: to live not within, or even between, sexual norms, but outside them, less hetero- or homo- than asexual, hermaphroditic less than *hors de la sexualité*.

Stephens's narrator strives to derogate, à la Jean Genet, the societal limits s/he finds imposed, even as madness is the incapacity to recognize, know, or successfully use any limiting case as a heuristic. A perverted version of freedom, madness ends up enabling neither a liberation from stricture nor relief from omnipotent structure, but imprisonment. "If I mark a spot X with intent to return it is very likely that I won't," Stephens writes. "If I mark the same spot X with no intent to return it is still very likely that I won't." The subject is centrifugal, and returning displaced by infinity sans reprieve. In madness, the subject is deprived of her subjectivity; she becomes an object. At that moment, she turns helpless witness to what keeps coming back, bland and indistinct, as an eternal return of the same. Hence Stephens's evocations, again and again, of "again and again." Hence her unvarying view of the lieu, "It was the same city all over again." Hence a temporal disruption—or distension—that stymies memory and desire by collapsing chronology, so that "Dusk comes at morning," whatever the weather "It is the same season," whatever happens "It is the same day. // It is the same day." In this timeless scenario, past and future past converge, "What was" merges with "Will have been," and "Is it even plausible," Stephens wonders, "to speak of after?" The answer, of course, is no. Even the prose is caught in a kind of maddening freefall, in which subject and object are conflated, tenor and vehicle untethered; literality becomes hard to sort from conceit, as all standards, centers, levers are dislodged. As an account of the limit-experience, Stephens's style encounters limits of its own: enacting sameness, at times her prose risks being samey itself. We think of Shelley's angel, beating its desperate wings against the void, and of the pathos that image provokes.

Madness is an inability to mark or differentiate, to secure firm footing in an ever-dissolving place, a context without context. The mad know no telos, hence no progress. Divested of any concept of forward or back, tautologically taut, they are condemned to the punishment leveled by the gods against Pentheus: interminable wandering between a pair of suns. Having looked at what was forbidden to sight, Pentheus is consequently not blinded—the expected penalty, orthodox Greek myth frequently laying down an affliction equal and opposite to the crime—but rather visually saturated: he believes his city one direction, only to discover, partway there, it lies behind him; no sooner does he change course than the confusion repeats itself. His impotence to arrive renders him literally *Unheimlich*: un-housed, not at home, uncanny, strange. As someone who “gasp[s] for the foreigner. I ask the foreigner to join me,” Nathalie Stephens, in her “much travelled body,” with a “box crammed full of boarding passes,” seems to suffer a similar fate. Her warnings against the vagueness, the vagaries, the villainy of locale are so insistent that the reader wonders whether she isn’t reminding herself to beware. “The first difficulty is location,” she postulates, “Place may very well be the first falsehood.” The landscapes she enters and exits, like the languages at play in her book, are legion, nearly incommensurate. Myriad cities rise up, seemingly simultaneously, as purveyors of pain and of passage, yet the setting is not always urban: for every cathedral a beach intervenes, for each hydro line a heron; alongside the métro are tar-paper gutters and a drive-through we’re likely to associate with smaller towns, not to mention the pampas even farther from the metropolitan core. “A place name,” Stephens proffers, “is an occurrence of retreat,” and every locale in her book appears to be retreating from the others, if not from itself, even as its author is in flight.

This distancing from the center, existential as well as geographical, is acute. Despite a professed “belief in astray,” Stephens’s speaker is not in happy or unhindered transit between languages (French and English) or locations (France and North America, the U.S. and Canada). De-territorialized, exilic by nature, she is perennially adrift, yet she fails to ‘survive’ her myriad transitions and translations. “The border is such that either way I cannot cross it,” she confesses. “And here, on either side, does not exist.” From Norwich to Guelph, Brnik to Ljubljana, Chicago to Montréal, it is not so much that Stephens traverses boundaries—she is divided by them. She has set foot in Union Square and Montjuïc, Dartmoor and St. Denis, but they have reciprocally placed themselves in her, and their diversity, their divergence, has caused her to lose her way. An external corollary to madness, and maybe one of its causes, this jarring juxtaposition of

disparate places, each of them “une ville en vrac,” or a loosened, jumbled town, jams the compass needle, annulling any reliable sense of locus. All coordinates become tangled, as “The cities fold over and over,” and there remains no stable site by which to measure her motion. This is the existential recoding, for the ‘globalization’ age, of Saint Augustine’s lament, “Our hearts do not rest until they rest in You,” and of Jean-François Lyotard’s scientific concept of *la condition postmoderne*. Stephens’s disorientation is, in turn, internalized, with the refugees, hunger, torture, and “bulleted stone” around her acting as real sources of worldly sorrow, not to be abstracted, yet spurring a recognition that her own inflictions are inflected by the world’s. In parallel, the babble she hears becomes the Babel she speaks. Her use of the Queen’s English, indicated by spellings such as “colour,” “grey,” and “meagre,” a tendency to use ‘s’ over ‘z,’ is constantly parried by French interpolations: “outré-mer,” “frontière,” “le chien claudique,” “Me voici.” The latter are not signaled by italics, furthering the sense of a single, continuous language of discontinuities. Nor is Stephens’s heteronomous lingua franca a merely binary system, but is interrupted by Spanish phrases like “cabrón,” by the Slovenian “prosim,” equally unitalicized. “Our languages,” she observes, “are bridges splintering.” Connections are constantly crumbling to chasms, and if “The management of thresholds is an arduous practice,” Stephens is fatigued by that noble attempt.

The Sorrow And The Fast Of It is a strange, unsettling mix of encoded ontology, weariness and wariness, with blatant, emotive excess, occasionally pushing melodrama. It is an uncomfortable, discomfiting book, theoretical and theatrical and bleeding from the heart. While hardly ‘difficult,’ in terms of thought, style, or form, it is by no means easily assimilable, either, resisting not so much interpretation as accommodation. The prose and the plot possess a sort of invasive, viral quality, one that puts the experience of trial on trial: *c’est chiant*, we might say, *mais ça chante*. Our reluctant sense of the speaker is someone—or several someones, or no one—helplessly peripatetic but also pariah, fleeing even as she, or he, or they are fled from. The son-daughter of Cixous and Genet, Stephens is obsessed by breaking free, only to find herself broken, brakeless. Eroded by what she cannot erase, halved by a dual ‘I,’ she writes in a splayed metropolis of traces and of trauma, where “it is reductive to speak either of autonomy or a bind. The madness disallows this.”

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