

A Speculative Dictionary* for Clare Milledge

Theoretical Regression: A Warm Sheen Against Received Ideas

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A warm sheen

1. sheen is a smooth word often found on the back of shampoo bottles. 'A soft lustre on a surface'; partly reflective, perhaps slippery, always shiny. In the early seventeenth century sheen meant beauty and resplendence, which perseveres today in the cosmetics industry, along with its more popular synonyms such as gloss, polish, shine, shimmer, radiance.
2. Georges Bataille accused 'mainstream' Surrealism (André Breton et al.) of placing 'the work before the being' (like too much makeup on the face). In 1929 Bataille founded *Documents*, a short-lived alternative archeo-surrealist magazine, proclaiming it as a 'war machine against received ideas.' Milledge supposedly misheard this phrase, but reiterates her aural gaffe and thus attributes a power to a *war-m-sheen* – a thin coating becomes a weapon. Kafka wrote that a 'book should be an axe to break the frozen sea within us.' He would be pleased to know that a warm sheen can also do the job.

Academic Horse

1. family: *academia equidae*. In art, a symbol of power, nobility, mobility, bravery, status. The domestication of the horse occurred c.6,000 years ago, somewhere in the steppes of central Asia – a tough mount but worth the trouble. Equine images have been popular since paleolithic times: Przewalski's horse – a wild, now endangered breed – was painted with a wobbly flair, most notably in the caves of Lascaux and Chauvet, France.
2. Bataille's essay, 'Le cheval academique' (The Academic Horse), compares the depiction of the horse on ancient Greek and Roman coins with later Gallic copies. For the ancient Greeks and Romans the horse is restrained and well-proportioned; for the Gauls the animal is berserk, monstrous, abstract. This is not a 'technical fault' on the part of the Gauls, says Bataille, but a 'positive extravagance'. Inspired by the Gauls, a horse for Milledge resembles an intergalactic projectile, screw, penis or dildo – a 'definitive response', Bataille says, 'to the platitudes and arrogance of idealists.'

Acéphale (also Acéphalian)

1. from Greek *akephalos*, literally 'headless'. Art history is familiar with headless bodies: the statue of Queen Napirasu from the ruins of Susa, the three goddesses from the Parthenon, Nike of Samothrace, Michelangelo's unfinished bound slave, Alberto Giacometti's *Walking Woman*. Iconoclasts, like lovers, always engage the head first. Every lover is a theoretical headsman.
2. name of the brochure and secret society that Bataille founded in 1936, whose sacred meeting place was in a forest where a tree had been struck by lightning. As Bataille wrote, 'Human life is exasperated by having served as the head and reason of the universe. Insofar as it becomes this head and this reason, insofar as it becomes necessary to the universe, it accepts serfdom.' To be headless is to be both innocent and criminal. 'Man will escape from his head as the condemned man escapes from prison', thought Bataille. This gives Michelangelo's unfinished bound slave new meaning: without a head is he really unfinished, bound, and a slave?
3. Milledge is perhaps concerned with what a plinth (body) becomes without an object (head). The answer? An object (body).

Amethyst Deceivers

1. family: *Hydnangiaceae* (fungi). Latin: *Laccaria amethystina*. A small edible mushroom with amethyst colouration that fades as it ages, thus becoming difficult to identify; thus just like memory; thus just like most things.
2. from the Greek *amethystos*, meaning 'not drunken'. Why? The stone functioned as a kind of early placebo based on the belief in ancient Greece that the precious violet-purple quartz prevented intoxication. During medieval times soldiers fashioned amethyst into amulets for wearing into battle, believing it to possess apotropaic powers – all fatal injuries would be deceived, like Christ's Five Holy Wounds or Mr. Potato Head.
3. name of a song first released in 1998 on the album *Autumn Equinox: Amethyst Deceivers*, by the English band Coil.

Bataille, Georges

1. 1897-1962, French librarian, archivist, pornographer, numismatist, poet, mystic, father, polemicist. 'We have in fact only two certainties in this world – that we are not everything and that we will die', he said.

Black Door (without owner)

1. Roman mythology: Janus is the god of beginnings and endings, and thus the guardian of doorways. Represented with two faces, Janus sees the future and the past, presiding over birth and death (the present is a blind spot). When open, a door is a means of admission or exit; when closed, a means of exclusion or imprisonment. But a door without an owner? Like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat whose body vanishes but mischievous smile remains, something ownerless confuses, even frustrates.

Callitris columellaris

1. common name: Coastal Cypress Pine. A small coniferous, evergreen tree belonging to the cypress family and native to coastal Australia. Aromatic and resistant to termites and fungal decay. Extremely flammable. Medicinal qualities include treating colds and skin irritations. Strong and straight timber makes it suitable for cabinet making, fencing, ship building, spear-making.
2. the consensus today is that we're all up a tree, so to speak. Bataille is up here too, as a corpse that won't shut up: 'Trees that forcefully soar end up burned by lightning, chopped down, or uprooted. Returned to the ground, they come back up in another form.'

Glass

1. a material equivalent to Paul Valéry's observation that 'God made everything out of nothing but the nothingness shows through.' A substance that is easy to break, walk into, scratch, smooch your face against. Porn for Architects.
2. Milledge blocks the transparent surface, either draping hessian or painting and scraping an image into existence (see *Hinterglasmalerei*).

Hessian

1. breathable material made from hemp or jute. Derived from the uniforms worn by soldiers from the state of Hesse, in western Germany. Hessian soldiers – referred to as 'foreign mercenaries' in the Declaration of Independence – were contracted by the British empire to fight in the American Revolution.
2. a strong, scratchy fabric that decomposes (regresses). In Australia we're familiar with hessian from the sandbags used for flood mitigation, or from photographs documenting the dumb bloodshed of trench warfare from the twentieth century. For Milledge, hessian is perhaps a substitution for dirt, and by extension – I will posit – excrement.

Hinterglasmalerei

1. German for 'behind glass painting', a technique whereby paint is applied to the back surface of a panel of glass. This practice has a history in Byzantine icon painting, folkloristic images, as well as modernism (glass painting classes were taught at the Bauhaus).
2. the medium attracts those who believe in the spiritual power of images. As Paul Klee tells us, 'art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible'.

Solar Anus

1. how can an anus be a sun? William Blake was on to something when he painted *The Ancient of Days*, so too was van Gogh when he painted *Starry Night* from the window of his asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. If that doesn't help, picture a colonoscopy made into a Hollywood film, a dog that eats the christmas lights, a moon shaped like a donut during a solar eclipse. As Nietzsche said, 'night is also a sun'.
2. name of an elliptical essay by Bataille, published in 1931. 'The terrestrial globe is covered with volcanoes which serve as its anus.' Among other things, Bataille's essay reminds us that our splenetic ecosystem is deflagrating us.

Smoke

1. 'a visible suspension of substance'. Associations include: magic, ritual, deception, mysticism, spells, signals, fumigation, fire. A beekeeper uses smoke to calm the bees during the robbery, a magician escapes from the stage in a puff. During a papal election the cardinal conclave burn the ballots in a special stove within the Sistine Chapel; if the smoke from the chimney is white (*fumata bianca*) a pope has been elected, if black (*fumata nera*) a consensus has not been reached.
2. burning incense has a long and varied tradition in religious, spiritual and pagan practices: if frankincense is not available other saps are used, i.e. *Callitris endlicheri* (Black Cypress Pine).

Sap

1. essential cocktail of water, hormones, mineral salts and nutrients that flows through the vascular system of a plant, such as the *Callitris columellaris*. When pressure builds within a plant that has wounds or openings sap will ooze, slowly. A pimple that pops on its own accord; an orifice employed by the substance it secretes. An original discharge of uninhibited juices, hence our figurative use of the word in relation to energy and sexual vim. To be 'sapped' is to be enervated, spent, sexless. Thus, sap dries and hardens into a kind of energy of its own.

2. to be called a 'sap' is to be gullible and doltish. Historically, the word denotes a secret tunnel or trench to a fortified place, and is derived from either the Arabic word *sarab*, meaning 'underground passage' or *sabora*, 'probe a wound, explore'. Nature was way ahead of Marquis de Sade.

Shaman

1. like any good communicator knows, deception is always a factor. Where the artist fails the shaman usually succeeds, or is it the other way around?
2. in touch with 'the world of good and evil spirits', the shaman knows that where there is idealized beauty and proportion there is also ugliness, malformation, formlessness. The monstrous always returns to the surface in order to disturb it, like a fart in the bathtub.

Theoretical regression

1. a few days after Milledge asked me to write something she sent me a document with a note contextualising her title: 'there's a highlighted sentence on page 30 with your name on it...' p30: 'Might there not be some anxiety about *theoretical regression*, given that Bataille insists here on the magic of figural images? Milledge insists on a figural magic too, but like all good magic tricks, the answer remains beyond our reach.

*'A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks.' Georges Bataille, *L'informe* (Formless), 1929

Tom Melick

Tom Melick (b.1986) is currently writing a children's book on the Lascaux cave paintings.