

An essay for Pavel Büchler, in *Conversation Pieces*, Manchester: i3, 2003

A retrospective ideal

Or

The Subject's Revenge

Beginning to write anything makes me very uneasy, yet today I feel more anxious than usual. I find many pressing tasks demanding my immediate attention (feeding stray cats, planting strawberries, and snipping the dead heads from hydrangea among other actions). It is a surprisingly productive time; all the irksome jobs that have been left outstanding are resolved and now I have to face the odious blank page. I am not a nervous person by nature – indeed, I have a tendency to sangunity – but the demand upon me renders me curiously ill at ease, as though every attempt to find a marked path in my text brings me back to the same spot, as though I am lost in a dark room looking for the light switch. My old friend John (who is a real person, not a character invented for the sake of writing) always advises starting in the middle, but this is to suppose that something with a centre exists: that there is indeed **material**.

If in the last paragraph certain phrases seem familiar, it is because they are those of Freud, writing on 'the Uncanny'. He makes it clear that while phobia has a precise object, anxiety lacks an object. Conceptual art may also be said to lack an object. Yet if both anxiety and conceptual art lack an object, they also have a most particular object that is lacking. While the kind of object one may have come to expect under certain conditions may be absent, there is, nonetheless, another kind of object, one that has peculiar effects outside of the specular field. If there is any object, then it is one towards which a certain criticality about its materiality, or its privileged position in a domain founded on vision, is directed.

As these unusually (yet real) constituted objects appear in new mediums, they also appear in new locations.

So it should come as no surprise to find a work by Pavel Büchler in the shower stall of a bathroom in the seminar rooms of a psychoanalytic training group, and even less of a surprise that the training group has a Lacanian orientation, in which the object/not-object has a particular function and meaning, over and above what is formed through a specular investment. Nor should it be surprising to find another work in a bookshop, taking up a number of shelves and being almost indistinguishable from all the other books and shelves that surround it, until – that is – one notices that the books are carefully arranged in a system that, while logical, bears no resemblance to the conventions of classification that surround it. It should not be startling either that a series of drawings by (oh, I do not know what to call him now – should it be Büchler? Yet that implies objectivity, distance, and I have known him for far too long. Is that the source of my anxiety? Or Pavel, implying a familiarity that may be inappropriate here?) – anyway, a series of drawings are published in the journal *Angelaki*. These are numbered from zero (0) to fourteen (14), and seem to show the futile attempt at the removal of a stain, as might appear in a D-I-Y magazine, rather than in a serious journal of philosophical speculation. The drawings pass through polishing the mark with a duster, wetting it with a sponge and rubbing again with a soft cloth, sanding with a block and polishing again, squashing something (unidentifiable) down on the horrid thing and trying out a bit of cotton wool on it. The title is ‘How to make it come back’, and it strikes me that one can count on the repressed to make its return. Oh God, it returns.

In the shower there is an electric light, rigged up in the same haphazard style as the drawings might advise. It flashes on and off, constantly switching and unconnected to the light switch in the room. From the seminar room, it is easily seen, a distraction from the work on hysteria, mathematics, subjectivity, trauma and the accounts of case histories limited to members and trainees only.

Whatever happens, the light keeps going, on/off, on/off, and horribly, it is under a shower unit with all too predictable results if it were put to use. It is a stupid, fugitive thing, but it promises an unassailable violence, intricately laced with the effects of bungled actions, errors, and repression. Most accidents occur in the home – it is well known – taking place in familiar surroundings that are forever marked, thanks to Freud, with feelings of unfamiliarity, fear, and haunting. Fortunately, there are plenty of psychoanalysts around, some even prepared to offer special fees, if the situation proves overwhelming.

In the bookshop it is quite another matter. There is no one qualified to offer therapeutic help, and what is on offer is outside of the terms of usual reference. Pavel Büchler (again that sense of awkwardness) chooses a lovely book, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* of 1830, then asks the staff of the bookshop (or rather, I ask them on his behalf, persuading, begging, bullying) to stock the shelves with a selection of titles, all from stock that is more usually in other departments. Each title must have the word 'red', the word 'black', or 'red and black', 'black and red' in it. It is no more than a shift in the system of classification, but it is discountenancing nevertheless, as any change in habit has the tendency to be. Suddenly, each potential reader is confronted with a moment of perplexity: what faces one is both familiar and strange, and so anxiety resides in the undecidable.

I was always a tidy-minded, literal child, caught between two languages. As an adult, I feel anguish when encountering contradictory predicates. I prefer to maintain barriers, like a Swiss border guard, ensuring that the repressed only escapes through unconscious, and thus unrecognised, pathways. I have come to detest and fear all that is nebulous, empty or insubstantial. I suspect these words are not my own, and, indeed, feel that this whole short essay is out of my control. He (that is, Pavel Büchler) said I could write what I like, but I do not like to write, to commit myself so irrevocably. It is a condition, like a malaise, and I do it anyway. He said he could only pay me what I paid him, yet in all the years we have known each other, I have never paid him anything, as far as I can

remember. There is always a price, however, and he has managed to trace the sum of £56.16 (after interest is added), of which the sixteen pence is especially alarming. Despite myself, he has extracted 1, 123 words, no, 1, 137 words from me, and they are all founded in anxiety.

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